

Palm Sunday

March 28, 2010

May the words of my mouth and meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in thine eyes, O Lord our strength and redeemer. Amen

I have always struggled when it came to preaching sermons following the reading of the passion narratives.

St. Luke is much better storyteller than I could ever dream of being.

And to be honest once the gospel says that the lifeless body of Jesus has been placed in the tomb, there does not seem much else left for a preacher to say.

The prince of peace is dead and the hopes of Jesus' followers have all been shattered in one short week.

When confronted with such a bleak picture, a preacher can be tempted to tell congregations...don't be worried Easter is only seven days away.

Soon we will all be enjoying our favorite hymns, fancy new clothes and chocolate eggs.

But that message seems like a theological cop out.

It is as if, I am saying that this day of palms and passion, has no integrity or message that is all its own.

And I suspect if we are honest, most of us would say that the pain and suffering of the passion story is closer to human experience

than empty tombs and fantastic stories about folks rising from the dead.

Abandonment, betrayal, and suffering that is something we can all relate to, on some level.

We have felt the sting of Judas' kiss on our own cheeks.

We have had our times in our lives when no one had the courage to stand with us.

And all we wanted to do was run away from the responsibilities that God had given us.

Can this cup be taken from me? I know that I have said that many times in the course of my life.

We have all been in that garden, waiting to be abandoned, saying to ourselves that God is not so great, and in fact is a God that is really a cosmic sadist.

In his book, *A Grief Observed*, written about the death of his wife, C. S. Lewis wrote, "It is not that we are ever in serious trouble of ceasing to believe in God, but that we might come to believe such terrible things about him"

So maybe the true challenge on a day like Palm Sunday, is that it gives us a frightening glimpse into God's nature.

Maybe the reason there is nothing to be said, is because we cannot handle the truth that a loving God would allow his son to be beaten and killed.

This is what many folks argue that the events of Palm and Passion Sunday teach us about God.

As a priest, though, I have a slightly different perspective on the reasons that we hear these stories prior to the celebration of Easter Sunday.

Instead of trying to place the blame for these events on God, I think that Palm and Passion Sunday try to teach us that we cannot have it both ways.

We cannot have an Easter morning of integrity without a dose of painful reality. We cannot have resurrection next week without the death of our hopes and our dreams.

All four gospels remind us that Jesus was positively, absolutely dead. There is no getting around this truth.

And our liturgy reminds us that we are all in someway responsible for his death.

We may not shout crucify him but when we fail to speak out against injustice or are silent when innocent people suffer, we are just like those people 2,000 years ago who shouted down Pilate.

Our condemnation of Christ, our anger at God's free gift of love comes when Jesus reminds us of our hypocrisy, our failure to live out the faith that is within each of us.

Perhaps that is why early Christians insisted on choosing such a shameful symbol of death and degradation for their movement.

They realized that only the cross itself, captured the reality of Jesus' betrayal, doubts and death and gave us a reflection of our own.

One of my favorite theologians put it this way, "A universally acceptable Christian emblem would obviously need to speak of Jesus Christ, but there was a wide range of possibilities.

Christians might have chosen the crib of manger in which the baby Jesus was laid, or the carpenter's bench at which he worked as a young man in Nazareth, dignifying manual labor, or the boat from which he taught the crowds in Galilee or the apron he wore when washing the apostles' feet, which would have spoken of his spirit of humble service.

Then there was the stone which having been rolled away from the mouth of Joseph's tomb would have proclaimed his resurrection.

Other possibilities were the throne, a symbol of divine sovereignty, which John in his vision of heaven, saw that Jesus was sharing or

the dove the symbol of the Holy Spirit sent from heaven on the day of Pentecost.

Any of these seven symbols would have been suitable as a pointer to some aspect of the ministry of the Lord.

But instead the chosen symbol came to be a simple cross. Its two bars were already a cosmic symbol from remote antiquity of the axis between heaven and earth.

But its choice by Christians had a more specific explanation.

They wished to commemorate as central to their faith in Jesus neither his birth nor his youth, neither his teaching nor his service, neither his resurrection or his reign, nor his gift of the Spirit, but his death and his crucifixion.”

This is where we find the message, the truth of the story we are given today. The cross of Christ sits on that hill seeking us out, calling to our souls and reminding us that although there are times that all of us will abandon Jesus,

Jesus will never abandon us.