

Sermon for Palm Sunday
April 17, 2011
Trinity Church, Menlo Park
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How quickly “Hosanna” has become “Crucify Him.”

We began the day with the crowds. With them, we entered Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, God’s deliverance of the people of Israel from exile. We waved palms in procession and sang ‘Hosanna’, which really means, ‘Save us Messiah, our King.’ But, then, with those same crowds we threw down our palm branches and raised our fists, crying, “Let him be crucified! Let him be crucified!”

With Jesus deliberately arriving on a donkey colt in a peasant procession from the east, we celebrated both prophetic fulfillment and political demonstration. For with every ‘Hosanna’ we protested the presence of the Empire deliberately arriving in powerful procession from the west just to underscore who was the oppressor, who held the power over all of life. With the crowds we turned against Jesus. With Peter we said, “I will not deny you.” And then we denied him. With Judas we asked, “Surely, not I?” And then we betrayed him. With Pilate we said, “See to it yourselves.” And then we turned him over to be crucified.

How easily and how terribly the mood has changed and loyalties have shifted. Are we any different today from those crowds who followed Jesus?

Archbishop Desmond Tutu was once asked how he maintained his optimism. “I’m definitely...not...an...optimist”, he said. “I am...a Prisoner of Hope!” “Optimism can turn far too quickly into pessimism if conditions don’t go well. Hope is different! Hope is an article of faith! That despite all appearances to the contrary, it’s going to be OK!”

There is no Easter hope in the lessons today. Nor will there be all week. And unless we can walk these paths, leaving our comfort zone, our self-satisfaction, our dependence on optimism and appearances, into a world of darkness, of betrayal, naked power, cowardice and death, then to the cross and then to the tomb, we will not even begin to grasp the power of the Resurrection. Let me say that again: to grasp the power of the Resurrection requires that we walk the paths of darkness and betrayal first.

So, it is very important that every year we participate in this Palm/Passion chorus of inconsistency, in the shift from ‘Hosanna’ to ‘Crucify.’ For the truth is our participation is a confession that evil not only exists in the world but also lives within our hearts.

We, too, can participate in bringing about death – the death of innocent people, of people’s dreams. We, too, can deny another person. Evil, says our liturgy, has a way of abiding in us all.

In contrast to all of this, there is the remarkable goodness of Jesus. There is the Godliness of Jesus.

Now, let me be clear. Jesus' God is not the one who gave his only son to be killed to atone for our sins. William Sloane Coffin tells of a college student who came to him when Coffin was Yale's chaplain. The student sat down and said, "I've come to tell you that I don't believe in God anymore." Coffin said, "Well, tell me about this God you no longer believe in." The student described a vengeful and violent God. Coffin said, "Thank God you don't believe in him anymore. I don't believe in that God, either."

This picture of God whose love can in some way be bribed is not the God of grace that Jesus proclaimed. The God of love that Jesus embodied. That God you cannot get to love you more by your good deeds or love you less by your bad deeds. In the crucifixion, it is not God's mind that needs to be changed, it is ours. Our minds, our lives, our denial, our fearfulness, our hearts – that's what needs to be changed.

What is it about Jesus that provides that centeredness allowing him to be so true to something unseen, something that is deeper and more real than what appears to be? Jesus knows God's unconditional love and he remembers it extends to all. He never forgets it. On the other hand, we tend to forget it often and when we do, we are seduced by the things of the world, by appearances and idols.

Jesus' passion is not only his suffering but his passion for God and for God's realm of justice and peace. Jesus was so in love with God and his call to love and serve God that he could not have gone in another direction than where he was headed: into the broken spaces filled with fear, the very heart of evil and suffering.

So where does that leave us? It leaves us in the midst of real life where ambiguity exists and fear leads to denial and betrayal. To real life where only the reconciling love of God can make sense out of the senselessness of suffering. God's love does not do away with the cross; God's love is the thing that makes it possible to bear it, to share it, and to pass through it into new and abundant life.

Holy Week has begun. The great gift of Holy Week is that we get to walk the way of Jesus with Him – the story of God's unconditional love for all. This is the one time in the year when we really enter into the story and meet Jesus there. We use our bodies this week: we carry branches, we march in procession, we sing. We need these actions to get it all. And we can't get the whole story, I believe, if we jump from this Sunday to the next. We need to go each step of the way. So I urge you: don't miss out on this week. Don't miss out on the walk with Jesus. Be here Thursday night: sit down for that last supper, feel the intimacy of the foot washing, walk with Jesus to the garden. And Friday, touch the hard wood of his cross. And Saturday, the festival of festivals, the Great Vigil: feel the warmth of the fire; see the church transformed from darkness into the bright light of Easter. Shout, "Alleluia!" again. Touch the fresh promise of baptismal water; breathe in the fragrance of the flowers. Be here Thursday and Friday and Saturday, be part of the abundance of the community gathered. Say "No", if you possibly can, to all

those other claims upon your time. I pray that you take out your calendars when you go come and make room to come back here, to meet Jesus.

We carry within ourselves those two processions – the one from the east and the one from the west – as we walk into Holy Week. The way of Jesus and the way of the empires of today – of greed, power, and domination over others. Each moment we make a choice between processions. With whom will you walk this week?

Trinity offers up a community that walks with Jesus, a procession that leads to the cross and the crosses of your life and our world. Let that cross carry you to the tomb and the promise of new life. Let us walk together as the community that would follow Jesus, not Pilate and his modern namesakes; proclaim him as the Risen Christ; and become Prisoners of Hope. Amen.