

Crowns

Psalm 31:9-16; Matthew 26:14-27 Palm/Passion Sunday, April 9, 2016

Today is the first day of the Holiest of all weeks. During this Season of Lent we have been on a journey together, culminating in the events of this coming week. This is, perhaps, the most difficult of all Sunday's to craft a sermon that fully encompasses the events of today, as Jesus enters into Jerusalem, riding on the back of a donkey/colt, being honored and hailed as the Messiah King, with Palm branches waving in salute, and wreaths of flowers encircling his head; while also covering the events of subsequent days, when the attitudes and responses toward Jesus change drastically; and still reflect upon the significance of all these events to Christians of the Twenty-first Century.

In many traditions the church assembles every evening during this week for a simple service of scripture reading for that day. Even then however, many do not come, leaving a gap that allows people to move from celebration to celebration, with little or no mention of the agony and death that lies between. It is dangerous to only concentrate on Palm Sunday and Easter, for one could lose sight of the true cost of Go's amazing grace, extended to us freely and abundantly.

You see, the truth is, we cannot get to The Day of Resurrection joy without the painful journey through denial and rejection, to the criminals cross of crucifixion, the agonizing death, and the abandonment of the tomb.

And so it is, that today began with the children and choir leading the celebration, with shouts of "Hosanna, blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord!" But we cannot dwell there. The echoes of the shouts still ring as we move on, giving way to the fear and distrust that will influence the way the week proceeds.

As I prepared this message and contemplated the scriptures for today, I continually heard the words echoing in my mind: "Crown him with many crowns, the Lamb upon his throne." Many artists renderings depict Jesus with vines and flowers twisted and braided together in a crown befitting a king as he sat atop that young donkey. A crown for a king. A parade for royalty. The people recognized that Jesus was the Messiah for whom they had waited and watched. They had SEEN the Lord and were filled with great joy!

So what happened? Why did the joy and celebration of the crowds gathered in Jerusalem lead to the trial, crucifixion and death of the one hailed as King? The "Chief priests and elders of the people conferred together to bring about his death." Why? Surely they were threatened because of the great miracles Jesus had performed. Most definitely they feared the power he displayed. Without a doubt, there was concern that Jesus had such a large and passionate following. And so, "The soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. 28They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, 29and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" 30They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head."

Once again, a crown was placed on Jesus' head. But this crown was a crown of pain, a crown of shame, a crown of humiliation. The crown was not in celebration of the King, rather this crown was designed to put Jesus in his place.

One theologian writes: "The world thinks that preachers really need to know their place. Keep preachers in a pulpit talking about innocuous things like how many angels can dance on the head of a pin or what caret gold the streets of heaven are paved with? But preachers should never talk much about anything really important like politics, or what people do in private with their bodies, or how money is or is not spent. That's when preachers quit preaching and go to meddling. Preachers are often reminded that they don't want to step on the wrong toes.

If that's true of preachers today, imagine how true it was when God's Son came as an ordinary rabbi from the backward province of Galilee. He was always meddling with people's sense of how He ought to behave. He was always talking about money. He was always stepping on toes. He was always challenging peoples' assumptions about what it meant to be God's people. The tipping point, as some like to call it today, was that Jesus started messing with Jerusalem and the Temple. He started upsetting the applecart by challenging God, Inc. Jesus just wouldn't keep in His place. In short, He became a threat to the comfort of the religious leadership and a threat to the Temple-based economy of Jerusalem.

It's no surprise that the Roman governor would want to keep the peace particularly at the most important local religious festival when the population swelled with pilgrims. That's how Jesus ended up dead at the hands of the Romans. He caused the religious leaders to feel insecure. He caused those that made their living from the Temple to feel insecure. Finally, Jesus caused even the Romans to feel insecure.

Indeed recognizing the insecurity of men and women and boys and girls is the beginning of wisdom. For God is a jealous God who will accept no other gods! Indeed death came into the world at God's command in order that we might not live endlessly separated from God in a hellish eternity brought by our own foolish choices. From before the foundation of the world, the Lord God knew that He would have to become human in Christ Jesus and live the life we cannot live and die the death we don't want to die in order to rescue us from sin, death, and evil. God's Son Jesus could not be kept in a tomb by death *or* a huge stone *or* even by temple police. For in Christ Jesus: love is stronger than hate, good is stronger than evil, light is stronger than darkness, and life is stronger than death. His place was never in a tomb. Christ Jesus is the King of the Universe, and the Holy Spirit is on the loose in this world.

Of course, that's the real danger of the Christian story. It's never been about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin or what caret gold the streets of heaven are. It's about the death of sinners like you and me. It's about dying and rising with Jesus in the waters of Holy Baptism that we might be His own and live under Him in His Kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.

There's nothing quite so dangerous as a group of baptized children of God whose lives are being turned upside down one day at a time. For people who are convinced that their Lord Jesus isn't in that tomb refuse to accept that there is any corner of the universe or any corner of their lives that

doesn't belong to God. And such faith is contagious. Yes, that kind of faith is extremely dangerous and pushes the fear buttons of people who, in their insecurity, must keep insisting that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit should be kept somewhere far away from anything that really matters.

So on this Palm Passion Sunday I ask you; What is your passion? Who do you live for? How will you spend your days? Jesus is calling; Jesus is calling you to come from your place of comfort. Jesus is calling, come follow me. Amen.