

Palm Sunday – Year A

This will go into the books – into our memories – as our oddest celebration of Holy Week ever, no doubt. But the gift here is that we have more time, this year, to really reflect on these days, to enter into what they mean for us. We will not be “too busy” to celebrate Maundy Thursday. We will have time, on Good Friday, to pray for the world, to travel the Way of the Cross, to sit in the silence of the tomb. We will, perhaps, treasure more than ever the sight of a single candle dispelling the darkness around us – even in our own homes.

As we begin this Holy Week today – we have what is labeled as the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. It was the custom of the Greco-Roman culture in those days for the people of a city to come out to meet a conquering king and escort him, always a him, into the city, shouting loud acclamations. So what we are seeing played out here is indeed a royal welcome. The people of Jerusalem, some followers of Jesus and some not, are rolling out the red carpet, so to speak. The evangelists are showing us the reign of Christ – but the rule, the way of Christ is one that leads not to further oppression by *this* king – but to liberation and life that comes out of suffering and death.

When Jesus rides the donkey into Jerusalem, he is contrasting the way of God with the way of the powers ruling the world. As he has done throughout his life, by his teaching and the way he lived, echoing Mary’s Magnificat, Jesus is turning things upside down. He is telling us all that God has a different perspective.

That “different perspective” is in Paul’s song that we heard from Philippians, when he describes a God not of power and might and exploitation, but of humility – sharing in our humanity even in death resulting from injustice and *in*-humanity.

This year, perhaps more than any other, we may come to understand more deeply that God is *with* Jesus – and with us – even when we cry out, “My God, My God, why have you abandoned us?” We may, this year, be able to hear the words describing Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, and know that we are seeing that lived out as Elmo continues Tim Brockman’s legacy of People Helping People at Max & Emily’s, offering bread to any to come.

We may – through Nancy’s gracious and prayerful reflections – make a Way of the Cross of our own times, together in spirit, on Good Friday afternoon – to help us see that the Passion of Christ is still in our midst.

But recognize that this “Passion of Christ” is not just the suffering – then or now. No, the *passion* of Christ is *revealed* in the suffering – or rather, in the response of Jesus to the suffering.

In Matthew’s version of events that we heard today, Jesus is repeatedly taunted by others with their misperceptions of who God is and what God’s power looks like. “If you are the Son of God, come down from that cross – escape the suffering.” “Let God save you from the cross if God loves you so much.” But look at the response of Jesus. This is Matthew’s gospel – Matthew, who links everything to the Hebrew scriptures. And here the only words Jesus speaks from the cross are, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” Those words are the first verse of Psalm 22. And while that Psalm continues with description of the suffering, it moves to these words:

“I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:
You who fear the LORD, praise him!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him;
stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!
For he did not despise or abhor
the affliction of the afflicted;
he did not hide his face from me,
but heard when I cried to him.

Jesus knew the *entire* psalm – and so did Matthew’s audience. Matthew is letting us know that even in the midst of our experiences of isolation, God is with us. The cross is yet another revelation to us that God’s glory, God’s presence, is not opened to us *because* of the cross, but is opened to us *in* the cross.

We are told that the curtain of the temple – the curtain that separated the holy of holies, the dwelling place of God, from the rest of the temple and people – was torn in two from top to bottom. That sign of *separation* was no more. The crucifixion shows us God present with us *in* our suffering. God’s presence is revealed to us in the cross of Christ, because only there can we see forgiveness and love as the response to violence and injustice, only there does love have the last word.

The Passion of Christ is not his suffering. No, Jesus’s passion is the love of God, the love he knew to be the *nature* of God.

So let us this week celebrate the Passion of Christ together – even at a distance. Let us pray on Maundy Thursday for the grace to be servants to one another. Let us pray for our broken world on Good Friday, seeing in the cross all that separates us from one another and from God, and praying for restoration, so that on the Vigil of Easter, when we sit before a newly lit candle, we will see ourselves, too, in the new fire lighting up the darkness. For this is the Passion of Christ – to restore all things, to bring all things – the broken, grieving, shattered, separated – back into oneness in God.

May it be so.

The Liturgy of the Palms

- [Matthew 21:1-11](#)
- [Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29](#)

The Liturgy of the Word

- [Isaiah 50:4-9a](#)
- [Philippians 2:5-11](#)
- [Matthew 26:14- 27:66](#)
- *or* [Matthew 27:11-54](#)