

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Sunday of the Passion
29 March 2015

Scripture readings:

Mark 11:1-11 Isaiah 50:4-9a Psalm 31:9-16 Philippians 2:5-11 Mark 14:1 - 15:47

For reasons I don't really know, Palm Sunday is often in parishes the most heavily attended Sunday of the church year, even more so than Easter. And it's a peculiar day in the life of the church calendar. It's very peculiar for me because I preached my trial sermon before I was ordained into my first parish on Palm Sunday. All I remember is the title, "*I Love a Parade!*" [laughter] I'm not sure I do anymore.

We're at this extraordinary juncture in following the life and history of Jesus where he makes this outlandish decision to proceed bearing the true word of God even into the most hostile corner of the world. Jesus goes into Jerusalem knowing full well what is going to happen. He knows that it is the same voices that sing "*Hosanna to the King! Hosanna to the Son of David!*" the same people who joyfully break off the palm branches and lay their coats as a saddle on the donkey and in the street for Jesus, those are the same voices who eventually will say "*I don't know him. Crucify him!*" It's the same voices!

I think if we candidly reflect on what these stories and traditions mean for us, they instruct us that those voices are *our* voices. We are the same people who are capable of saying "*Hosanna to the Son of David!*" and "*Crucify him!*" It is the nature of the beast, and we are the beast. We confess, believe and even teach that we are by nature sinful and unclean and cannot save ourselves, that there is something about us which refuses the perfection that God intended at the time of creation.

Our failure to be perfect - or maybe better said: our perfect humanity which is a perfect indication of our failure to be perfect - is not (and I think this is what Jesus lost his life for) is not an indication of what God's success is like. Because we cannot bring ourselves to love our enemies, because we cannot bring ourselves to love those who are different from ourselves, because we cannot bring ourselves to love those we find frightening, different, strange, outside, other, unlike ourselves, we like to enlist God's aid on our side and say, "*God doesn't like them either.*"

Jesus today as he enters Jerusalem... Think about the story. It was a long one and it is a good one and it does bring one to tears to imagine that Jesus is going into Jerusalem to be challenged by and to take on these groups of people - church people, the religious organization of his day. The chief priests, the scribes and the Pharisees are gathered against him because they are afraid of this truth. The religious institution hates the political and established empire - Rome. But when it comes to hating Jesus they can get along all right. They can decide to torture and obliterate Jesus because they have a common enemy. So Jesus takes on the religious institution, the political institution, the social institution. Just a couple of weeks ago we saw him in a very extraordinary way take on the financial institution. He went into the temple and overturned the tables of the moneychangers and said, "*This business of your economy which demands money from poor people to make God love them stinks and is not beautiful in the nostrils of the Almighty.*"

Any wonder he gets a hard time! And we might say, any wonder he is assassinated! He's not just locked out; he's nailed down! It is because - and I firmly believe this - it is because he had an idea that the Creator God, which he encountered in the first page of his scriptures, was who that page of scripture said he was: the Creator who stands back from creation and loves what is created. And that means every person in the world - fully, completely and sufficiently to bring them into being in the first place and then the religious idea to bring them into being in the second place. That was odd politically, it was odd religiously, it was odd economically. Nobody liked the idea. And to this very day we have problems with it.

If I ask you after having read this long and profoundly moving story, who the real bad guy was in it, who are you going to say? Take the bait. Who was the real bad guy? "*One of you at this table*": Judas. I think

Mark wants us to believe that Judas takes the fall for the twelve, but there were twelve people at that table who were sharing bread with Jesus, twelve people at that table who turned their back on Jesus, twelve people at that table who fell asleep in the garden, twelve people at that table who said, "*I don't know who he is,*" twelve people at that table who weren't there when push came to shove.

The only difference to me between Judas and the rest of them is Judas might have been just a little more honest than they. Judas desperately wants to make up, apologize for, pay back and undo what he did and save himself. He *means* his sorrow. His tears came from the soles of his feet and burned deep, deep channels in his cheeks. He was profoundly sorry and made an extraordinary confession, more than any of the others that we read about. The only difference is Judas never grew beyond believing that he had to save himself. And at least in this world, never got to the point where he could say, "*God has to save me or I am dead.*" So he hanged himself. But I think there was an extraordinary integrity about Judas, an honesty and a sadness. And maybe Judas is there for us today to challenge us to believe that instead of choosing Judas' way - not that we can ever undo the fact that we have betrayed the Savior and denied God's love and been contrary in our lives to what God intended at creation - but to believe what Judas didn't get to believe is that God is larger than our worst possibilities and that God's love is not like our love. God's love excludes none and not one in his creation and that all of us sit at the table and share that bread with the Savior along with Judas.

What Jesus does when he goes into Jerusalem is proof of God's love because - now friends, here's the real kick in the pants with Palm Sunday - when Jesus goes into Jerusalem to die, he does it for the high priest, the scribes, the Pharisees, for Herod, for Caesar, for the centurion, for the criminals on either side, for his own apostles, for Judas as well as Peter, and for you and for me.

This is God's affirmation that there is nothing larger and nothing darker that could obliterate the breadth and height and depth and expanse and reach of the love of Almighty God for all creation. And you, my friend, are in that creation somewhere, and there is no hole in God's love through which you could possibly fall and be missed. If there is any beauty to this story at all, it is the beauty of God's love for us and for all people.

Now if that's the message of the King of the Jews, I don't find it particularly problematic, but you know what, we've had two thousand years to think about it. What would your role have been in the Gospel for today had you been there? It's a question worth asking and this is the week we take to think about that fully as we look toward Thursday night and participate in the celebration and remembrance of the first Eucharist on the night in which Jesus was betrayed, remember his passion, his death, his burial and surely his resurrection.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.