

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Sunday of the Passion
20 March 2016

Scripture readings:

Luke 19:28-40, Isaiah 50:4-9, Psalm 31:9-16, Philippians 2:5-11, Luke 22:14-23:56

There are all kinds of customs that have connected themselves to this celebration and commemoration throughout the centuries of the life of the Church. In my first congregation parts of which were German-speaking, those who woke up last on Shrove Tuesday were called the *Palm Esel* - the Palm Jackass. Well, *Palm Esel* is a very interesting piece of medieval history. If you visit The Cloisters Museum in New York you will see there a medieval life-sized donkey on a little platform with wheels and you can only guess what it was used for on Palm Sunday - somebody playing the part of Jesus sat on the thing and it was pulled around. Churches today...even Trinity Wall Street in New York used to have a donkey go down Broadway on Palm Sunday.

I was a little bit interested by this so at 1:30 this morning I was on the computer trying to figure out what the difference was between a mule, a donkey and a jackass. Well, you know there are loads of other things, too, like "hennies" and "zonkeys." There are all kinds of cross-bred creatures which are not horses. They are asses, of course. They are not the stately beasts that carry victors and wonderfully successful soldiers on their backs. They're usually beasts of burden. Some of them are used for transportation. They're not stately. In this part of the world we know about the mine donkeys. They used to go into the mines and were blind because they stayed there. They never came out of the mines until they were dead.

This sort of humble, lowly creature is the Volkswagen that Jesus rides into Jerusalem as opposed to the Cadillac of the stallion that the victorious generals and the army personnel rode when they had a victory for the empire or for the city. The custom was to have those victors to enter the city in triumphal procession, and to this day you can see in Rome - you don't have to go to Rome. You can go to New York, Washington Square, to find triumphal arches which acted as sort of gates to a city which provided a ceremonial space for the victor to return with the spoils of war, including the captured people, usually in a chariot drawn not by one, not by two, give me three, how about four horses, and the victor usually draped in a purple robe which was suggestive not only of the emperor but the emperor was god so suggestions of royalty and divinity, success, power, and triumph.

Now the procession we recall today with Jesus on a jackass and a bunch of silly Jews and Gentiles, poor people, his friends, prostitutes, tax collectors, lepers, blind people, foreigners, outsiders, gooks, geeks, undocumented aliens, addicts, Episcopalians, Lutherans. *[laughter]* All of those strange little people are gathered around Jesus in this sort of imitation of a triumphal entry which could have been seen as a real insult to the empire and to the emperor, a sort of *Saturday Night Live* send-up of a triumphal entry. But my guess is these people were so unimportant that nobody took notice. They were so insignificant that it wasn't worth the emperor finding out about it. But, nonetheless, this endures in the tradition of the Church for two thousand years as a remarkable day in the calendar of the Church, known among our Spanish friends as *Pasqua Florida* - flower Easter. Sometimes in German it's referred to as *Blumensontag* - the Sunday of the blossoms. And

it's felt that the state of Florida - get this - is called Florida because it was discovered on *Pasqua Florida*.

But what is this all about? Is this the early Church's attempt to remember the victory that Jesus wins and that Jesus can't be defeated by the empire? Is this the victory of one party over the other? What is this all about? The sad thing is Palm Sunday, as joyous as it is, really starts on a kind of high with a procession, joyous hymnody and all the rest of it, but this is one week in the life of the Church where we will be busy. If clergy don't earn their money any other time of the year, we get it out of them in Holy Week. When we get to Thursday we start a liturgy that lasts for three days! Now that's amazing for people who only work one day a week and half a day at that. I'm done by noon on Sunday! *[laughter]*

But here is this week to remember, commemorate and celebrate the passion and death of this extraordinary Jew of two thousand years ago, and in a sense as we enter that three-day liturgy Thursday, Friday, Saturday which is called in Latin the *Triduum*, the three-day service. Just as today as we walked around the church we are invited to remember that we participate historically in what happened two thousand years ago, but there's danger in that, friends, the same danger I worry about at Christmas time when I worry that we celebrate Christmas as a birthday party for Jesus. Christmas is about God becoming flesh, and Palm Sunday and Holy Week are about *why* God becomes flesh. You know we wouldn't have Christmas without Easter. That's a Jewish birthday that would have been forgotten long ago without what it is we celebrate today and the rest of this week and next Sunday. And that is this extraordinary business of a man who comes to this world, as you and I came, through the physiology of a human being, occupied a womb, squeezed through a birth canal into a diaper that he soiled, dependent upon his mother's breasts for sustenance and on the kindness of strangers to survive.

This human being brings into the world with him an idea about God that we still find astounding. What is that idea? Well, let's consider what happens on Palm Sunday and what's going to happen this week. Jesus is celebrated by his closest friends, the people he lived with, the people he ate with, the people he celebrated with, the people he prayed with, the people he was perhaps most like or perhaps the most unlike, but they were his chosen, his dearest friends, the Twelve. And they are celebrating his entry into Jerusalem which he certainly knew when he did it was dangerous. But they were there to show him their support, give him their encouragement, thank him for the message of God's love that he brought to them.

And then what happens by the end of the week? Not only are Herod and Caiaphas and the high priests and the religious establishment and the Roman Empire his enemies, but here's the really extraordinary part - even those people who put him today on a pedestal, we who shout, "*Hail, King of the Jews! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!*" Every last one of them, every last one of *us* turns our back on him. When we get to Good Friday, that crucifixion is the loneliest event in history. That man hangs there alone. And just to show you how really religious Christians are from the very get-go in the Church, we start as a community to point at Judas and say it was his fault. He was the one who betrayed Jesus. Oh, not by himself! And he wasn't the only one who turned his back on Jesus. Every last one of them did. Every one!

And so today is a moment of sobriety for us as we celebrate Palm Sunday - to remember that in that crowd who shout "*Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the*

Lord!” are we and our voices and it is we who also will by our human and sinful natures betray him in the end. But the one thing that Jesus gives us is his refusal to believe anything other than that every last person with whom he trod the face of the earth was herself and himself a creature of the Almighty God.

If we read this lesson carefully today we will find that it is the centurion who really makes the first confession of faith more or less, isn't it. *“Truly,”* he says - This is the Roman soldier. This is the guy who's a murder machine. This is the brutal police officer. This is the law enforcer. This is the militaristic arm of empires saying, *“Truly this was the Son of God!”* It was the criminal, at least one of them, who says, *“This man has done nothing wrong.”* And, friends, probably one of the most grotesque and Hitlerian creatures on the face of the earth before the Second World War was Pilate himself. And what does he say? It's Pilate who says, *“I find no guilt in him”* and washes his hands.

“Man, I don't know who he is! I'm not with him! I'm not a Galilean!” The pope in Rome - the pope is the successor to Peter.

And here we are as a Church needing, I think, on this Sunday to be seriously reminded that it's not Judas' fault, it's not Pilate's fault - it is *our* fault, if there is a fault. It is our need that demands this expression of divine love or Jesus' devotion to the idea of God's eternal love that we need ourselves so desperately. So whether or not it's a triumphal entry in favor of the empire or a bunch of ragtag Jews and Gentiles around a weirdo preacher from the seashore, Jesus maintains his devotion to the idea that the earth is the Lord's, the fullness thereof and everyone in it and that all need God's love to survive.

So the business and the evolution of Holy Week, it seems to me, is important to us because it reminds us that we are no better than Pilate or Caiaphas or Annas or Peter or anybody else, that we are all a part of the human family for which and to whom Jesus brings this immutable message of divine love for all people with the idea that without that love there can be no life and that that love is unmeritable, undeserved, unearned, unpurchaseable but a divine gift given in its fullness and completeness by a loving God to those who need it, not to those who want it, earn it, or otherwise get it for themselves.

So the invitation this week is an invitation to self-evaluation. How honest are we going to be about how much we need God's love? How honest are we going to be about how much we don't *deserve* God's love? And how honest are we going to be about how we shall share God's love?

Donna Reaser recently shared with me a book of photographs of faces of people in New York. There's an extraordinarily beautiful photograph of an old Jewish woman who had been widowed. She asked her husband whom she knew was dying, *“Moe, what will I do when you are gone? How will I live without you?”* *“Take the love you have for me and share it with others.”*

Moe preached the Christian gospel to his widow in that sentence, it seems to me. Jesus preached his perception of God's love for the whole world in those same words: *God loves you. Love each other.* Two simple phrases, and it's the entire ballast of Christian belief. God loves you and everyone else. Love each other.

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