

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, April 1, 2007

Sermon Text: Luke 22:14-34

Now, in most congregations, Palm Sunday is like a pre-game show for Easter. It is a warm up for what comes next week.

Peter Gomez, the preacher to the University of Harvard, refers to the festive frenzy of Palm Sunday, the organized chaos of processions and children waving palms, and there's really nothing better. I don't know if we had anyone taking some pictures today of the children excited and taking part in worship and waving the palms and shouting, "Hosanna!" Nothing better – especially if it's one of your children or one of your grandchildren.

There is also a shadow of ambiguity about this day. The week it begins is holy because of what happens on Thursday and Friday to come. The festive shouts of Hosanna for King Jesus will be drowned out and forgotten in five days by more sinister shouts of "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!" The jubilant crowd devolves into a mob of bitterness and hatred, demanding a public execution.

So, for most churches, we focus on Palm Sunday as sort of a pre-game. Most people do not attend Maundy Thursday. Please note in your bulletin it will be at 6:30, and also, we need reservations if you're coming to Good Friday, and that's 12:00 for the lunch and 12:30 for the service. Most people do not attend. We're left with this week at Sunday good attendance and wonderful pageantry with the children and the palms. King Jesus coming into the palm-waving crowd, and then skip Thursday, skip Friday, and next Sunday, Easter! We almost succeed in preempting the cross.

By an accident of the calendar, we do have communion today, and in communion if we listen with our ears and our hearts engaged, we cannot avoid the cross, the innocent blood, the sacrificial death on our behalf. The ritual supper Jesus remembered with His disciples was binding up of the Old Testament Passover with its lamb's blood symbolism, a binding up of that with Jesus, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world in this new and better covenant.

Yes, Good Friday is here in a way on this altar, even on this happy day of palms. Such is our world, and such is God's love. We prefer though our religion to be positive and uplifting. Who doesn't? We prefer resurrection to crucifixion. Who wouldn't? But still, I encourage, I encourage only because I cannot require you, to come to the Good Friday service. On average across the board, Easter will outdraw in attendance Good Friday by about ten to one.

My former advisor, now Bishop, Will Willimon, once suggested that churches ought to post a sign on Saturday before Easter that reads, a sign on the door that reads, "No one gets in here who wasn't here Friday." We're not going to do that, but he suggested it.

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Of course, the Easter event is the central focus of our faith. It means that death cannot win! It means that evil cannot win! It means that love and life ultimately win out no matter how impossible that seems, even if it takes a resurrection to do it! God will win over sin and death! How can we appreciate just how much God loves us without the cross? I know the standard explanations, but sometimes, sometimes, I think the absence of a crucifix somewhere in our churches represents a faith that simply doesn't want to think about what it cost God to love and to forgive us.

Holy week is holy precisely because on Friday the King was greeted by palms, King Jesus then died, and that death we believe was somehow the final expression of God's holy love for us. If you don't somehow hear that and see it and live with it, and then when we all come back next Sunday on Easter to celebrate, it loses something. It loses something. It can become a mere flower festival! Or it can become a mere rite of spring without the understanding of what it cost God to love us and forgive us. This is the day that set into motion the events, which led to Friday. The decision to come to Jerusalem was fateful. He did not have to. He could have stayed in safe, rural Galilee. At Bethany, a few miles outside the city, He did a peculiar and provocative thing. He ordered the disciples to find a donkey, and then He rode it the rest of the way into the city. That may not mean very much for us, but He knew, and the people there knew what everyone would think when they saw it. At Passover, everyone remembered the prophecy from Zechariah, “Behold your king comes, humble and lowly, riding on an ass.” It was a beautiful vision. Israel's Messiah and true King coming to the city of David to claim the throne and begin His reign. That is how the people saw it, and they responded ecstatically. They threw their garments in His path, and they sang and they shouted, “Hosanna, blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!”

New Testament scholar, N. T. Wright, says it was a deliberately prophetic and provocative act because there already was a Jewish king, at least, by title in Jerusalem, but he was a collaborator with the Romans, the oppressors. It was Herod.

I love what the late George McLeod, founder of the Iona Community, said. He wrote once, “I simply argue that the cross be raised again at the center of the marketplace as well as the steeple of the church. Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves, on a town garbage heap, at a crossroads so cosmopolitan that they had to write His name in Hebrew and Latin and Greek, at the kind of place where cynics talk smut and thieves curse and soldiers gamble. Jesus entered the city like a king, come to claim His throne, and for a moment when the people were shouting and waving the palm branches, and little children were singing, for a wonderful moment, it seemed that He might actually seize power, ascend to a throne, and begin His reign. But he didn't! He did not! Instead of wielding power as all other kings before Him had wielded power, He chose love. Instead of the accoutrements of worldly authority, He chose the authority of compassion. He declined a throne, and instead chose to reign in the hearts of men and women and children, who would accept Him and follow Him and live like Him in the world.”

“What Kind of King Goes Down Without a Fight?

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Mary sang of her son’s upside down kingdom earlier in the Gospel of Luke, “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” Jesus in John explains the cross instead of the throne in this way. In John 3, “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so must the son of man be lifted up that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only son so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish, but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.”

Jesus was elevated to king, not on a throne, but on a cross for us. He said in John 12, “When I am lifted up from the earth will draw all people to myself.”

Yes, it is Palm Sunday, and that means that what we call winning and succeeding ultimately does not matter very much. Palm Sunday means the ultimate realities in this world are going to be, finally, compassion, kindness, and love. Death and evil only think they have final power to rule and persuade. Final power and authority belong to our God and King, who fought for us on a cross so we sing all glory, laud and honor to the redeemer king to whom the lips of children made sweet Hosannas ring. Thanks be to God for this beginning of the most holy week. Amen.