



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: March 28, 2010

At the End of the Parade, Robert B. Culp

Philippians 2:5-11; Mark 11:1-11

It has been said that Palm Sunday is a rather puzzling, if not problematical day within our faith. For its meaning and the mood with which we are to approach it are by no means crystal clear nor certain. Today's service began with a joyful and triumphal note of praise and celebration: "All glory, laud, and honor to Thee, Redeemer, King!" But it will conclude with the mournful, if still majestic words, "Ride on, ride on in majesty! In lonely pomp ride on to die."

The contrast is stark and poignant, and you have to wonder what's going on here? Are we supposed to laugh or to cry? To sing hosannas or to share in a humiliation? Are we witnessing a glorious triumph or an unspeakable tragedy?

The confusion we face and the contradictory moods we feel are reflected in the story itself, as told by Mark. What Mark doesn't tell us, but what we know from the context, is that the so-called "triumphant entry" took place at the time of the Passover, when everyone who could do so made their way to Jerusalem to celebrate the deliverance of their ancestors from slavery in Egypt ... a sacred narrative that will be noted during our special Maundy Thursday Communion and Seder/Passover meal this coming week.

As Mark tells it, Jesus and his band of followers were among the Passover pilgrims. And as they came closer to Jerusalem, something dramatic took place. Instead of continuing to make his way on foot, Jesus mounted a colt and rode into the city. We really cannot be sure why he did this. Only later, after Jesus' death and resurrection, did his followers come to believe that by his actions Jesus had meant to fulfill the prophecy of Zechariah, who had written: "Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; Triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass..." It seems a likely explanation, though we can't be certain of it ... because, as far as we know, Jesus never shares with his followers what his intention was that memorable day.

What is clear, however, is that Jesus' decision to enter Jerusalem the way he did was quite

deliberate, and not spontaneous. Everything seems to have been pre-arranged. Somebody – a close friend or perhaps an admirer – had promised to have a colt ready, and had been told what the disciples would say when they came to get it. When they brought the colt to Jesus, he got on it, and soon the little procession took on the appearance of a ticker-tape parade ... with those who knew and loved Jesus shouting “Hosanna!” and making a carpet for him out of their cloaks and leafy branches as a way of expressing their affection and adulation.

I suspect that over the years the church has probably exaggerated the size and splendor of the Palm Sunday procession. Scholars note that it was probably not a large demonstration, and without question it did not involve the entire city. And ... at the end, it just fizzled out. There was no call to arms. There was no encouragement given to the anti-Roman underground. There was no challenge set before Jesus’ enemies. There was not even a speech made by Jesus to the group of people who has welcomed him, which is a clear indication that, whatever his purpose was, it was not a political rally. I mean, can you imagine the elected officials in Washington, especially this past week, missing such an opportunity to address their supporters?

Mark says simply that Jesus entered the city and went to the temple, and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve. That is an anti-climax if ever there was one!

So ... what does all this mean? What sense are you and I to make out of this very familiar, but quite puzzling tale?

To help us get at the meaning of Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem, I think Paul’s letter to the Philippians can shed some needed and helpful perspective. As you may know, Paul and the Philippian recipients of his letter had a particularly close and warm relationship. He was addressing them from prison, for they had expressed concern about Paul’s well-being, and Paul wanted to convey his gratitude. But as a result of a visit from one of their number, he had learned that there was some quarreling going on within the congregation, and Paul wanted to help them resolve their differences. (Parenthetically, if we think church conflicts and tensions are unique to our age, even a cursory glance through Paul’s letters will quickly disabuse us of such a notion.)

Interestingly, Paul goes about this task of conflict-resolution not by scolding them, not by minimizing the issues before them, and not by taking sides. Rather, he writes, “Let each of you look not only to your own interests, but to the interests of others.” And then he quotes from what scholars believe to be a fragment of an early hymn, reminding them of the example of Christ, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant ... he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.”

In his commentary on Philippians, Fred Craddock notes that this portion of Paul’s letter

is always the Epistle lesson for Palm Sunday, and he says “those who decided that it should be acted with a wisdom beyond their own.” Indeed. For when we read the story of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem through the eyes of Paul ...

- * we see a Jesus who is on his way to the cross, a Jesus who enters the city in order to get to Calvary, a Jesus whose descent from the Mount of Olives to the city below is symbolic of a far greater descent into the depths of human sin and suffering and need;

- * we see a vulnerable Jesus who is making the appeal of love, and he knows all the while that this appeal will be rejected;

- * we see One whom God has exalted precisely because he allowed himself to be humiliated;

- * and in all this, we see something that didn’t fit into the normal scheme of things back then ... and it still doesn’t.

In Flannery O’Connor’s short story “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” the central character is an escaped convict who calls himself “The Misfit” ... because, he says, “I can’t make what all I done wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment.” Just before this “Misfit” murders an old woman who begs him to pray to Jesus, he says, without any awareness of how profoundly Christian it is: “Jesus thrown everything off balance.”

My sense is that is exactly what Paul wants us to grasp ourselves – “Jesus thrown everything off balance.” He comes as a king, but puts aside the robe of royalty, girds himself with a towel, and then stoops low with a basin of water to wash off the dust from the feet of his followers. He chooses to go down the pathway that leads to death, when he might easily have avoided it. He is executed as a common criminal between two thieves, only to be exalted as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

“Jesus thrown everything off balance.”

The old assumptions no longer apply. The former ways don’t work any longer. Because the Suffering One has been glorified, the Servant is now Sovereign, the One who descended has now been lifted up. And his cross of death has become the tree of new life.

Now if Paul’s perspective is correct, then the way you and I participate in the story of Palm Sunday needs to be dramatically changed. For we no longer find ourselves among those who shout “Hosanna” without knowing the real nature of the One being acclaimed. Instead, we are among those who know who this Jesus is and where he is headed. And we know something else. We know that he is not primarily interested in our shouts of “Hosanna” nor our excited waving of palm branches. Rather, Jesus is interested in having us adopt his way of thinking and share his daily manner of living. Our whole existence, in other words, is meant to be shaped by this Jesus who has “thrown everything off balance.” And Paul says, “Have this mind among yourselves which you have in Christ Jesus ...”

What we have in Christ Jesus, says Henri Nouwen, is the “descending way” of love. It is the paradoxical way of dying in order to rise, of emptying your self of self in order to be filled with the Spirit of Christ, of losing yourself so that you may find yourself. Nouwen writes, “It is the way of suffering and being wounded, but it is also the way toward true healing and health. It is the way of humiliation, but also the way to resurrection. It is the way of tears, but of tears that turn into tears of joy.”

So ... what do you think that could mean for you specifically? I’m sure I can’t prescribe that for any of you, because only you can imagine what it could mean for yourself. What I can do, though, is to share what it has meant to some people whom I have known through the years. Conforming to the “descending way” of Jesus, a social worker named Linda was led to start a program of care and support for teenage mothers and their children in West Virginia, children so very vulnerable. Another person named Dave, a retired executive from the Social Security Administration, formed a group of workers to rehab row houses in downtown Baltimore and sell them at a reasonable price to those who otherwise could not afford to buy a home. A woman named Alice befriended a young man in prison, wrote to him every week, and visited him once a month ... and has been doing that for 9 years. Bill, a lawyer, began going one evening each week to a storefront church to provide free legal advice to the poor and disadvantaged.

And when I consider those whom I have known over the last 11 years here in Greenwich and the impact that has been made by you – at Neighbor to Neighbor, Meals-on-Wheels, Family Re-Entry, Shelters for Domestic Violence, St. Luke’s Lifeworks, Pacific House, the Red Cross, Tutoring and Mentoring Programs, Pathways, Sekolo in Namibia, Edna Adan Hospital in Somaliland ... and so many more ... there is ample evidence of what it does mean to have this mind which you have in Christ Jesus.

But who knows what other ministries can and will be embraced as this church family opens itself to dream new dreams in the coming years ... opening its doors here and at the Community House to serve the hopes and dreams, the hungers and hurts and needs of the community?

The message of this day is that God has chosen to rely upon us as channels of his grace and amazing love. Indeed, God is calling us to be instruments of his peace, nudging us to move into the very centers of power in order to speak the truth in love and to embody the way of Christ Jesus. In other words, you and I are called to embrace a willingness to be something like that obscure “colt” in the Palm Sunday story, so that we can carry the compassion, care, and mind of Christ to those places and lives in our world that desperately need such gifts of grace.