

Palm/Passion Sunday

April 5, 2020

Philippians 2:5-11, Matthew 21:1-11, 27: 11-54

This Sunday is unusual in that it has two titles: Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday. And reflecting that dual focus, it's unusual in that there are two Gospel readings. The first is supposed to come before the service with the blessing of the palms and it recounts the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. The second reading is part of the passion according to Matthew. As you will remember, we usually read the entire thing, with various people reading different parts. Today, however, given our changed circumstances for worship, I simply read the shorter version. I'd like to look at those readings in the context of Paul's letter to the Philippians. Because I think we can make a good case that all these readings can be seen as commentaries on power. Who has it, how you get it, what it's used for.

Philippians takes those questions head-on and says that Jesus, who could have had all the power in the world, chose instead to empty himself of that power, to come and live as one of us. "Kenosis" is the word, emptying. Someone once said that his image of God was of an old man, sitting in a rocking chair on his porch, just continually giving everything away. That's not our usual picture of power, is it? Our usual picture is more of coercive power:

EXERCISING all our prerogatives, insisting on our status, on getting our way, winning by whatever means. Sorry, Jesus is saying, that's not the way God works. THIS is how God works – and he spends his life teaching, healing, forgiving, blessing, feeding, obeying his call as the chosen Son by showing us what the mind of God and Kingdom of God would look like.

It's been said that there were two parades coming in to Jerusalem that day. From one side came Jesus, riding on a borrowed donkey, hailed by peasants, accompanied by people who were marginalized, who didn't count, who were poor and powerless. He came with a vision of God's kingdom, where all would be included, all would be loved, where war and violence would have ceased. But there was a parade coming in from the other side of the city as well. Pontius Pilate led that parade and he had columns of Roman soldiers with their helmets and weapons. There were all the trappings of power: banners, golden eagles, cavalry on horseback. These were the conquerors of the world, a world in which status and coercive power held sway. Hold those pictures together and you get quite the vision of those two kinds of power, those two ways of being in the world. I couldn't help but think that those two kinds of power were on display when we went into Iraq. On the one hand the rhetoric was about shock and awe;

on the other it was about winning hearts and minds.
Same issue 2000 years later.

There's a story told about Marco Polo who had been captured and was brought before the fearsome Genghis Kahn. The story goes that he was desperate for interesting conversation and so he started telling the Kahn about Jesus. When they got to the crucifixion part, Kahn exploded with AND WHAT DID THE CHRISTIAN GOD DO THEN? Did he send his thousands of legions from heaven to smite and destroy those who had so treated his son? Apparently, Polo's answer wasn't impressive, because Kahn never converted. And, if the crucifixion had been the end, death and coercive power would have won. But we know the other ending – we know that Jesus suffered all the world could throw at him and was vindicated in the end by the new life of the Resurrection.

All through Jesus' life people asked questions about his identity. Who is this who forgives sins, or heals the blind, or raises the dead? We hear it in the reading this morning when Pilate asks: Who are you? Are you the King of the Jews? And if you will remember back to the beginning of Lent, when there was the Gospel story about Jesus being driven out into the wilderness after his baptism – with Satan appearing to him with basically the same questions: IF you are the son of God, IF you are the chosen one – then prove it. Use those gifts to feed yourself, to be

popular and spectacular by throwing yourself off the temple, by seizing all the power in the world. But Jesus refused all that, knowing that the power of being chosen was the power to love, that it wasn't about self-gratification or coercion. You'll also remember that the text says that Satan left him to return another time. And isn't this the time? How tempting it would have been to short circuit all this suffering, to call upon those armies of angels, to exercise the power that would come with being God, to answer those who are taunting him from the foot of the cross. **SAVE YOURSELF**, they are saying. **IF YOU ARE THE SON OF GOD**, come down from the cross.

Let's go back for a minute to that parade into town. Hosanna, the crowds were saying. Hosanna means **SAVE US**.

Save us. What did they mean, do you think? For some, maybe it was as basic as save us from hunger, or this sickness, or my child dying. For some it probably meant the Romans. I read something written by a pastor who posed this question to some 7th graders: What is Jesus supposed to save us from? And he first got the predictable answer: from hell. But then he pushed them further. **WHAT DO YOU WANT GOD TO SAVE YOU FROM?** And the answers varied as you might imagine: One said **DEATH**; another said, **THE UPCOMING MATH TEST**; one said **FROM MY PARENTS' EXPECTATIONS**,

another said PRESSURE, and then one very shy girl spoke up and said, HE SAVES ME FROM MY FEARS. What would we say? He saves me from doubt? Violence? despair? bitterness? Loneliness? Guilt? Meaninglessness? Fear of death? The deep truth of our faith is that, whatever your answer is, Christ understands it and is here, walking through it with you, and taking that burden away, saving you.

But today, in this incredible situation in which we find ourselves, I'm going to suggest something in addition. Perhaps our prayer should be that of Paul: that we should be saved from a life of selfishness, from the blindness that means that we don't see others as our brothers and sisters, saved from a vision too narrow to recognize that we are called to put on the mind of Christ, saved so that we can come to see so broadly that we can understand how connected and dependent we all are, and how the call to love means the call to be responsible in whatever way we can, to all those who are equally loved by God. Saved so that we can be loved into being truly Christian. Amen.