

May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ enlighten our hearts so that we may know the hope to which we are called in Him. Amen.

PALM SUNDAY March 28th 2010

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Some believe there was not just one but two parades into Jerusalem on or about Palm Sunday. The one we remember today ... and another procession traveling the 60 miles from the coast, entering the city from the West ... Pilate's soldiers, a security force to keep order for the Festival of Passover.

Jesus' procession came in from the East, from the Mount of Olives. Perhaps he designed his deliberately to coincide with the show of Roman force? His riding on a donkey in line with ancient prophecy would set him clearly over against the ruling authorities. Just what many of his followers wanted to see – a new King in the line of David who would usher in a new reign of peace.

And Jerusalem? This is the ancient City of Hope and the city whose evil ways Jesus had wept over just days earlier. Jerusalem represents every human city.

The two processions may have represented for Jesus' followers two political alternatives for God's ancient people – either continued domination by a foreign empire or a new form of home rule with a new King, Jesus.

This was not, however the way Jesus thought of God's Kingdom. For Jesus, all images of the good society, all panaceas and utopias, all idealisms and ideologies, all provisional hopes in the lives of human beings are really temptations to serve the power of death.

In the sweep of history, Plato's Republic, Constantine's empire, Jeffersonian democracy, Marx's classless society, free enterprise and world government ... all are specific forms of the same kind of temptation ... The totalitarianism of Babylon, the authoritarianism of the Caesars, the divine right of kings, colonial imperialism, the American confederacy, Nazism, Chinese communism and their myriad counterparts ... all promise salvation of one kind or another and tempt human beings to pay them homage.

It is God, however, who builds the City of Salvation ... which is not some never-never Wonderland but a society which is alive in the midst of our troubled history, surrounded by all these other vain promises. And this City of God is Free ... for the foundation upon which God builds is his own freedom from and his authority over the power of death – it's foundation is Jesus Christ.

God builds this City of Freedom here for us. And all we who believe in Christ as the foundation of true freedom become members of his Body and citizens of that City on behalf of all who persist in unbelief.

Many do not believe ... They hate the Cross because it means a salvation not of their own making or choosing, but a salvation of God's grace and mercy. Some hate the Cross because it means our salvation is unearned, undeserved, unmerited. They would rather have a God who needed them to be obedient! But the radically new message of Holy Week still is that God does not depend on our obedience in order to forgive us!

Because many do not believe, it is the task and mission of the Church, the Body of Christ, to proclaim by its life and presence the character of God's City and to welcome others in.

Among the temptations to unbelief are the events of Palm Sunday. Despite appearances to the contrary, this is not a day of triumph. Easter Day is the day of triumph.

Like Jesus' disciples, we might want the story to end in triumph today. And political victory on Palm Sunday would have meant we would be spared Judas' betrayal, the cowardice of the other disciples, the mystery of the Last Supper and the agony of Good Friday.

But the Good News is not fulfilled in the Palm Sunday parade. Rather, Palm Sunday is a second temptation of Jesus following on from the first temptation in the wilderness. There you will remember Jesus was tempted by the devil to seize power for himself.

The first time, Jesus' prevailed over the temptation and the story says that the devil retreated "until an opportune time". Palm Sunday is that opportune time, in which Jesus is once again tempted to seize power for himself.

Again, he is victorious over temptation, but his disciples are thrown into disarray and dismay. Judas himself must have felt his own sense of purpose betrayed. Why devote yourself to a lost cause!? It is not surprising they all left him ... Only after Easter did they begin to realize the truth about Jesus. But Palm Sunday was a day of humiliation and shame, the failure of a dream.

Not much has changed in our day. We still carry a sort of nostalgia for parades – they promise power and the temptation to build earthly kingdoms, after our own fashion.

This temptation has shown itself in the way we go about mission. We have wanted to westernize foreigners, or make the poor middle class, and we believed that was part of our mission. Yet if the Gospel cannot offer comfort to people whatever their state or affliction, then it is not saving Good News.

So if Christian witness is not about building an earthly kingdom, what is it about? Does it mean a kind of withdrawal from the life of the world?

By no means! On the contrary, Palm Sunday is a call to profound engagement in the life of the world, in the pattern of Jesus, an engagement in which Christians are ready to offer their very lives.

A Christian is established as so free by the power of Jesus Christ that she lives free from any of the threats death may make and so she is able to use everything at her disposal – money, status, technical ability, training – as sacraments of the gift of her own life.

A Christian is free to move into the reality of the world's life and offer his presence without expecting anything in return. This means he is actively present in the life of our own city, simply living there, side by side with others, declaring with his life, and sometimes in words:

“I am here with you because God cares for your life and because God cares for you, I also care for you.” Period. Nothing more – no invitations to join the Church, no gimmicks, no concealed motives ... just the bare announcement of God's love and the freedom that love gives people to love each other. The rest we are willing to leave up to God.

Is this just fanciful dreaming? Well, there is a reason we remember the humble procession into Jerusalem still. And it is this ... so far, all our other dreaming about building the perfect Kingdom by ourselves has not yielded little.

Also, there is very little simple witness like this going on at present, despite all our studies and strategic plans. Palm Sunday calls us to a presence in the world that reflects God's presence with us in Jesus.

This is a secret and quiet witness really, not a noisy triumphal one. The only noisy evidence of the City of God alive and active in the world is when we gather – as we do this morning – to sing God's praises and to portray God's Kingdom in our relationships here.

The world may think us foolish for trusting God more than men or idols. And we may be tempted to think this is not enough. But on the day of temptation, let us remember to look to Jesus who himself suffered and was tempted, for he is able to help those who are tempted.

And let us journey with Jesus on his lonely path this week, learning from him the manner of presence he would have us live in the world. Then, as we have walked with him this week on the way of the Cross, the way of his suffering and death, may we also find ourselves ready to celebrate the real triumph of Easter Day.

May Christ be praised in our worship today and in our lives' witness to his humility and love. Amen

I acknowledge my debt to William Stringfellow, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan for ideas in this sermon. Graham Bland.