

Palm Sunday – Year C

We begin, today, the week we call “holy” – blessed – by first remembering a triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and then quickly moving into the somberness of what we call the Passion of the Lord. Today is called both “Palm” Sunday and “Passion” Sunday.

In days, or more accurately *years*, past – I defined the “passion” of Christ as the horrible events of his suffering and crucifixion. As a child, every week I attended the “Stations of the Cross” on the Fridays of Lent – sometimes even on Wednesdays. And when Good Friday came, we would go, as a family, to the Good Friday service... focusing on, it seemed to me, evoking a sense of sorrow for my sins which somehow nailed Jesus to the cross. Mel Gibson’s film of a few years ago, *The Passion of the Christ*, affirmed that view of what the “passion” of Christ means.

But I have come to believe that such an understanding of what Christ’s Passion means is so incomplete as to border on leading us down a rabbit hole. Looking at only these last few days of the life of Jesus as defining his passion misses the point, I think. No, the passion of Jesus is found in his life. The Passion of Jesus was, *is*, the Passion of God. We hear the passion of Jesus when he proclaims, “The Spirit of God is upon me. The Lord has anointed me. God has called me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to proclaim God’s *favor*.” What Jesus is *passionate* about is the kingdom, the presence, the reign of God – here with us now. What Jesus is passionate about is living the God-life within him, making God visible, telling us – by his life – that God is good, that God is about mercy, that God is love.

When Jesus rides the donkey into Jerusalem, he is contrasting the way of God with the way of the powers ruling the world. The civic and religious rulers of his day would ride into town on a horse decked out in armor, accompanied by a display of power that made everyone get out of the way. Jesus enters on a donkey colt, accompanied by his rag-tag band of followers, in what was a non-violent demonstration against that kind of power and domination, in a way that drew others close. As he has done throughout his life, by his teaching and the way he lived, echoing Mary’s Magnificat, he is turning things upside down. He is telling us all that God has a different perspective.

That “different perspective” is in Paul’s song that we heard from Philippians, when he describes a God not of power and might and exploitation, but of humility – sharing in our humanity even in death resulting from injustice and *in*-humanity.

The crucifixion of Jesus, described in great detail in each of the four Gospels, is not in itself so unusual, not in the time of Jesus. And we do not have to transport ourselves two millennia into the past to witness this kind of death, death resulting from injustice and inhumanity. We have only to look at the Holocaust, or the persecution of the Rohingya, to see that evil can appear to triumph while we only look on from a distance. We can, in our own country, make a pilgrimage of the way of the cross – following the Cherokee trail of tears, or a tour of lynching sites dating within our own lifetimes. We could, as the Visitation Sisters who live in center-city Minneapolis do, make a way of the cross by walking through their neighborhood stopping at each “station” where someone has been violently murdered. We can – through Nancy’s gracious and prayerful reflections – make a Way of the Cross of our own times together on Good Friday afternoon – to help us see that the Passion of Christ is still in our midst.

But recognize that this “Passion of Christ” is not just the suffering – then or now. No, the *passion* of Christ is revealed in the suffering – or rather, in the response of Jesus to the suffering.

It is only in Luke’s account of the crucifixion – the account we heard this morning – that we hear what he gives as the first words of Jesus spoken from the cross: “Abba, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Again, it is not so unusual, perhaps, to pray when we are suffering – but usually our prayers are for *relief* from our suffering. But what Jesus first speaks is again revelation of the heart of God: Abba, forgive them. At the heart of God is mercy and love, and violence cannot quench that love.

“Father, forgive them...” Episcopal priest Joseph Pagano says, “With this prayer, Christ takes all of the hatred and all of the violence and all of the vengeance of the world and says, ‘Enough.’ ... Enough. We’ve had enough of the spiral of violence and counter-violence that just leads to more of the same. It has to end somewhere. Enough. In this prayer, in these words spoken from the cross, Christ opens up for us, even in the midst of our broken and violent world, a new future of reconciliation and peace.”

In the context of Luke's Gospel – this gospel alone in which Mary proclaims God's greatness in the way God takes the mighty from their thrones and lifts up the lowly, this gospel which tells us repeatedly that God turns all things upside down – the cross is yet another revelation to us that God's glory, God's presence, is not opened to us *because* of the cross, but is opened to us *in* the cross. We are told that the curtain of the temple – the curtain that separated the holy of holies, the dwelling place of God, from the rest of the temple and people – was torn in two from top to bottom. That sign of *separation* was no more. The crucifixion shows us God present with us *in* our suffering. God's presence is revealed to us in the cross of Christ, because only there can we see forgiveness and love as the response to violence and injustice, only there does love have the last word.

The Passion of Christ is not his suffering. No, Jesus's passion is the love of God, the love he knew to be the *nature* of God.

So let us this week celebrate the Passion of Christ together. Let us gather on Maundy Thursday to lovingly wash the dust of pain and sorrow and grief from one another's feet. We all carry that dust with us... so let us share the impractical gift of love given to us by Jesus... let us take that opportunity to love one another. Let us break the bread and share the one cup, finding there the Presence of Jesus in our midst, in our own brokenness. Let us pray for our broken world as we gather on Good Friday, seeing in the cross all that separates us from one another and from God, and praying for restoration, so that when we gather at the Vigil, we will see ourselves, too, in the new fire lighting up the darkness. For this is the Passion of Christ – to restore all things, to bring all things – the broken, grieving, shattered, separated – back into oneness in God.

May it be so.

The Liturgy of the Palms

- [Luke 19:28-40](#)
- [Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29](#)

The Liturgy of the Word

- [Isaiah 50:4-9a](#)
- [Philippians 2:5-11](#)
- [Luke 22:14-23:56](#)
- or [Luke 23:1-49](#)
- [Psalm 31:9-16](#)