

Palm Sunday March 28, 2010

Palm Sunday is a day of special intensity—it's a day we do things we don't ordinarily do, and hear things we don't ordinarily hear. We listen to the story of Jesus' crucifixion and death only one Sunday a year. We hear it the Sunday before Easter because without hearing it, and hearing it deeply, the resurrection simply does not make very much sense; we *only* hear it this one Sunday because if we listen hard, if we listen deeply, once is about all we can handle. And here we are.

Perhaps the clearest note of Palm Sunday is that of rejection. First of all, there is the obvious rejection that runs through all of today's service. During today's liturgy we have twice acted the part of the crowd in Jerusalem. Using their words, we have made two demands. The first we said in the Parish Hall, when we shouted 'Hosanna', which means 'save us', 'save us now', to Jesus. The second was just minutes ago, same crowd, probably about the same enthusiasm, but 'Hosanna' had become 'crucify Him!'; and instead of talking *to* Jesus, we were talking *about* him. That's because Jesus had not done what was expected from him and wanted from him. He had not delivered to the crowd's satisfaction.

This is the great rejection of Palm Sunday, the one that continues every time we discover that life is not the way *we* want it to be and move our attention from Jesus to some one else or to some thing else that might offer quicker—and more pleasant—relief from whatever we think ails us. This great rejection is what ties our lives to the life of that crowd in Jerusalem; and makes every day a potential Palm Sunday. Keeping this in mind can help us to remember who we are, and who we need to become.

But there are some other important rejections going on in this story as well, not rejections *of* Jesus; but rejections *by* Jesus.

By looking at what our Lord disavows—by listening to *his* word of ‘No’ rather than to our own, we can, perhaps, move a bit more deeply into the mystery of his passion.

The first rejection occurred in the Garden; and the way Luke tells it is fascinating. Before coming to the Mount of Olives, Jesus seems to tell the disciples to arm themselves (nobody really knows what to do with these verses about swords). Then comes the time of intense prayer, when Jesus makes his final decisions. That prayer changed things; and when one of the disciples drew his sword and began to fight—Jesus said ‘No’ to that. Jesus rejected that and offered healing instead. It’s important to notice that he did this from choice, not from weakness—if he had chosen the way of armed rebellion, Jesus would have had at least a fighting chance.

Remember the temptations in the wilderness; the one when Satan offered Jesus all the kingdoms of the world if Jesus would only worship him? The disciple who drew his sword in the garden is offering a similar temptation. It’s the temptation to use whatever methods are handy and effective in order to get what you want, what you think is good. There in the Garden, after his prayer, Jesus is invited to use violence, to use the ways of the world—and so protect himself and his mission. But he says ‘No’ to this invitation to violence, to all such violence; and the disciples flee, and the Lord is taken by those who have and will use swords, and clubs.

Later, as Jesus is on trial before the Chief Priests, Pilate and King Herod, we see his second rejection. All of these authorities, representing together the full power of both Israel and Rome, they all demand of Jesus a legal defense, arguments, reason, rhetoric, in response to the charges—they’re asking him to come aboard, to play their game, to follow their rules. | | Instead of arguments and appeals, Jesus is mostly silent. And by this silence Jesus again says ‘No’.

Remember, this is the same Jesus who has so often baffled and bested the same scribes and pharisees; who has so many times turned accusations into opportunities to teach; and who has, with apparent effortlessness, avoided every legal and rhetorical trap the very cleverest of his enemies could set for him. Jesus doubtless could have offered a wonderful defense. He could have turned their stones, their weapons, into his bread, his own defense. But, instead of that, there is silence—his rhetorical genius stands mute. And so the Son of Man is found guilty and sentenced—once more, the victim of methods he chooses not to use.

Jesus' final rejection occurs on the cross. In words almost identical to those of the tempter, the crowd taunts—"If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself." When Jesus first heard those words, they were "If you are the son of God, throw yourself down." (from the pinnacle of the temple). The point is the same—give us a sign, give us a show, dazzle us. *Compel* us to believe by the magical, by the miraculous.

And in a final sign of what his life and his death are really all about, Jesus refuses, again by silence, this last opportunity to use that power the world craves. So, completely forsaken—with absolutely nothing to offer but himself—the Lamb of God cried out, and died.

With that cry, Jesus has rejected every form of coercive power available to him. He has rejected the power of armies and swords; the power of persuasion, argument and rhetoric; and finally the magical, ostentatious, and spectacular powers of another reality. The world, the flesh, and the devil. None of these is part of bringing in, or living out, the Kingdom of God. All of these types of power that hurt, that confuse, that force, that compel—all of these are denied. They are denied even for the sake of the very best, the very highest, of goals.

The real point here is that, once all of these are rejected, there is nothing left but love. All that remains is total self-giving love in obedience to the Father. And if we Christians ever, for an instant, wonder what we mean when we talk about love, remember that this—this cross and God incarnate hanging upon it—this is what we mean by love. Anything less is useless romanticism.

And one of the things we learn from the cross is that we are given one instrument, one tool, one weapon if you will, with which to be the continuing physical presence of Jesus in the world. We are given love; and we are shown what that love looks like. To be sure, we are not, thanks be to God, left with only our own ability to love. What we are given is our own willingness to love, joined with Jesus' love, strengthened and renewed by his love. And the cross is always the model.

Remember, the cross is not an isolated, abhorrent anomaly; it is not some rude interruption in the movement from God to us. Instead, the cross is the culmination of Jesus' life and ministry—for in that cross we see who Jesus is and who he calls us to be. We see love that has nothing to offer but itself—no armies to lead, no bureaucracies to help, no arguments to present, no magical rabbits to pull out of hats; only love that pours itself out until everything is gone—and then keeps on giving. This love is what life is really all about. Behold, the power of God.

All that is left is love, after everything else has been done, and after everything else has been rejected, all that is left is love—this kind of love. And that's enough.