

SERMON, ST JOHN'S PALM SUNDAY

This powerful day in the Christian calendar is full of painful contradictions – indeed, the entire thing makes no sense at all. It is totally counter-intuitive to imagine that the so-called “Triumphant Entry” could be considered a true triumph as the world understands that word. The people wave palm branches and yell, “Hosanna to the Son of David; Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, Hosanna in the highest heavens.” Yet, those same crowds, just a few short days later, yell “Crucify him, Crucify him!” The third verse of that beautiful hymn, “My Song is Love Unknown” by the 17th century priest Samuel Crossman, highlights the cruel fickleness of human nature:

Sometimes they strew his way, and his strong praises sing,
Resounding all the day hosannas to their King.
Then “Crucify!” is all their breath,
And for his death they thirst and cry.

We are all so fickle, so changeable, so easily swayed to follow the crowd to demonize others. Sometimes I think that disloyalty to a friend or family member is the gravest of all sins because at the core of disloyalty is the betrayal of Judas, and in the Passion play of life we have all at some time taken the role of the betrayer. I blush with shame to think of the times I’ve betrayed a friend, turned against someone, ruthlessly shared a confidence, and even formed alliances with others to spread rumor and spite. And some of the most painful times in my life have been when I’ve been wounded by the betrayal of others, by former friends who’ve chosen to believe lies, refused to forgive some slight, who cruelly chose to see me and my actions through a negative lens. If you think about it, Palm Sunday is probably the most painfully realistic day of the Christian year because it goes to the core of the dreadful truth of our humanity: one moment we sing strong praises of one another, then the next we thirst and cry for death. You and I are both that crowd waving the palms and the rabble yelling, “Crucify him!”

So, how can this terrible day remotely be called a “triumph?” The very word “triumph” comes from the great structures erected in ancient Rome with three arches through which victorious generals march with their proud armies, followed by the defeated enemy in chains and finally by the booty captured in war. So, is Jesus a victorious general? Well, the crowd that day certainly hoped that he would be, because when they yelled, “Hosanna!” they were really crying, “God, save us!” “God save us from our enemies, the Romans!” “Deliver us and restore both the religious and the political freedom of the Jewish people!” Clearly, the crowd that day hoped that Jesus would be the political leader they had long prayed for. When it became obvious to them that he wasn’t, that his salvation was of a different nature, his kingdom “not of this world,” they, of course, turned against and him cried for his death. The fickleness of human nature!

So, where is the triumph? A failed Messiah, a loser conquering hero, is an embarrassment, not a victory and the cross should be merely a shameful instrument of capital punishment, essentially the Roman version of the gas chamber or lethal injection. Imagine those

items as the central symbols in a place of worship! This is, indeed, the strangest of days that claims to see hope in something so dreadfully hopeless. As St. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians: “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.”

The “foolishness” that Greeks saw in the events of this day and week is precisely what makes this day triumphant. Greek Platonic philosophy was deeply offended by the notion that God, the “unmoved mover” could take on flesh and yet this so-called foolishness is precisely what we Christians shout from the mountaintops: God is enfleshed in Jesus, so God is enfleshed in all of us and in all creation. And if God is truly present in Jesus, then God is on the Cross. What a scandalous suggestion: that the creator of the universe should die a pitiful death on a loathesome instrument of torture! But the truth of Incarnation is what we proclaim and herein lies the triumph: because God is present in all our suffering and even in the death of all creatures, there is victory. You see, it all hinges on the nature of God who is perfect Love, and because death itself cannot vanquish such infinite Love, then the Passion and death of Christ on the Cross contain the inevitable seed of Resurrection. Palm Sunday realistically presents us with the horrible truth of the fickleness, betrayal, cruelty, suffering and death we see within and all around us (just look at Ukraine), but because God is there on all the crosses of this world, loving the world forward to Resurrection, then this strange day can truly be called a triumph.