

### Sermon 1

Over and over again in the long story of the church, Christian people have acted the roles we encounter today, not just on Palm Sunday, but in the daily life of parishes, dioceses, and the worldwide church.

**The Liturgy of the Palms: Luke 19:28-40; Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29**  
**The Liturgy of the Word: Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 22:14-23:56 or Luke 23:1-49**

There's nothing more exciting than a spectacular parade. Television spectacles, like the Oscars are something of a modern equivalent. We watch excitedly as new stars are born and see them surrounded by the press and adoring followers. We love heroes. We love following their lives and marvel when they buy big homes and jet around the world.

It is also true that we get something of a thrill when these modern idols are exposed. We revel in their destruction. Somehow it makes us feel better to know that the person who filled us with awe is just another fallible, flawed human being.

Palm Sunday in the drama of lessons and ritual takes us from adulation to betrayal and desertion. We know that the very crowds who shout "Hooray" will yell "Crucify him." One of Jesus' closest followers will betray him. Most of the disciples will desert when things get tough. The religious leaders, convinced that they are protecting Judaism from the upstart prophet will plot with cynical Roman politicians to kill Jesus.

When Jesus begins his journey into the Holy City, he is soon surrounded by excited crowds. They have heard that this prophet heals, feeds, raises from the dead. Perhaps he will solve all their problems. Perhaps he will throw the occupying Romans out and restore the Jewish Kingdom. Is this Man indeed the Chosen One?

Others have pronounced themselves to be the Messiah and have proven to be no such thing. Yet the hopes, aspirations, and demands of the people remain high. Maybe this time God will act. Jesus' followers were caught up in this excitement. All their fears about Jesus entering Jerusalem, his words about being killed there, are forgotten in the excitement of the reception. They must have felt very important, those disciples, as the crowds cheered. One tortured soul, Judas, perhaps hangs back a bit. We don't know his dark motives. Was he jealous? Had some truth Jesus said to him hurt him and driven him to revenge?

## Palm Sunday Sermons

In a few short days the crowds will decide that there's nothing in anything Jesus says or does that is good for them. The disciples, or almost all of them, will separate themselves from Jesus and run for cover. Judas will betray his Lord. The religious leaders and politicians will handle the matter with speed, and a man will die.

As the Eucharist ends today, we can almost feel the dark pall of evil. There's no happy ending in the lessons. The roller coaster surge of the liturgy leaves us down and shaken.

We may well ask ourselves which role we play in this human drama. Do we test God, Jesus, the Spirit in terms of "What is in it for me?" The crowd did. Do we resent the way the Faith accuses us and wish we could silence Jesus, as Judas hoped? Do we run from Jesus and hide behind self-preservation? How ironic it is that the religious leaders and most of the disciples acted from self-interest. The Chief Priests convinced themselves that an unholy murder was justified to safeguard the institution. The disciples perhaps convinced themselves that if the work was to continue, they should protect themselves from arrest and punishment.

Over and over again in the long story of the church, Christian people have acted the roles we encounter today, not just on Palm Sunday, but in the daily life of parishes, dioceses, and the worldwide church.

The question posed by that old African American song, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" points not to St. John and the Marys, but to the rest of us. How often have we deserted our church when we haven't obtained the things we think we need? How often have we turned on priests or fellow Christians when they have spoken the truth to us? How often have we put the institution before Jesus? How often have we just run away when things got tough? These sins are alive and well and flourish today as they did then. This isn't an outdated story. This is life.

For a moment, just a moment, it is good that the lessons today end with death, with no hope, with Jesus alone and dying. For in this Holy Week, which begins today, we have much dying to do, and dying hurts, and dying risks the end of everything. Yet as a community of Christians here today and as individuals, it is, as St Paul tells us, "in dying that we live."

Let us then offer our selfishness, corporate and individual, in Jesus to God as we walk to the Cross. Then in the silence of Good Friday we wait.

Sermon 2

Easter is there, beckoning, at the end of this week's mystical journey. But until then, the church enters into a time of confusion, a place of suffering, and a context of betrayal, fear, and pain.

**Isaiah 50:3-9a, Psalm 31:9-16, Philippians 2:5-11, Luke 22:14-23:56 or Luke 23:1-49**

After hearing a presentation as profound as the Passion Narrative, mere words seem almost like an intrusion. Our reading of the Passion on Palm Sunday turns us from the triumphal entry of Jesus into the holy city Jerusalem, and calls us to face the grim reality of Holy Week ahead. Easter is there, beckoning, at the end of this week's mystical journey. But until then, the church enters into a time of confusion, a place of suffering, and a context of betrayal, fear, and pain. Were we on an airplane journey, our flight crew would caution us to fasten our seat belts, as turbulence – not just some “bumpy air,” but real turbulence – surely lies ahead.

In this dark and difficult time, we will do what we Christians always do in our liturgy: we will commemorate historical occurrences and celebrate divine revelation. And we do so, not so that we can suffer as Christ did, but because we participate in a gradual unfolding of a single divine act. The world has been redeemed – once and for all – and each and every one of us has already been saved through the grace of Jesus Christ.

And this entire saving mystery is before our eyes each day. Our liturgy, our commemorations, our enactment of Holy Week serve to manifest but one part of that great mystery more concretely. We celebrate Holy Week as we observed all of Lent – not as if we had never been redeemed, but as having the stamp of the cross upon us, seeking to be better conformed to the death of Christ, so that the resurrection may be more and more clearly shown through us.

The redemptive love of God reaches its height in the sacrifice of the cross, and the church issues forth in glory from the resurrection that follows. But the church does not die again this Good Friday, nor rise again this Easter. Rather, the church remembers these ancient events, and through this remembering participates more fully in the plan of salvation.

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The mystery of the church's year is a whole, of one piece. The birth, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus is one event. And the path of humankind from sin to salvation is one continuous action.

And so, let us set our face on Jerusalem, that heavenly city where Christ has gone ahead to prepare a place for us. Let us fasten our spiritual seat belts in preparation for the rough ride of the coming week. And let us look ahead in certain hope and joyful anticipation of the fulfillment of all Scripture, the coming of the reign of God, the return of Christ in glorious majesty.

And until that time, we have a mission and ministry: to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. To assist us in that most daunting task, the church provides this yearly remembrance so that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace.

In this, Holy Week is a mysterious paradox. Begun today in triumph, with people waving palm branches and shouting "Hosanna" as Jesus enters Jerusalem, it has already shifted into that dark time of suffering and death.

The great omnipotent God who created the universe, who has existed since before time, and will continue to exist after everything we hold dear has come to ruin, who sees all and knows all, who became one of us in the person of Jesus Christ: this same God is now hanging nailed to a cross in the mid-day heat.

The God who caused floods, who spoke through earthquakes, wind, and fire: this same God now chooses to submit to agony of the most extreme severity. The God who led the people of Israel out of captivity, stayed with them as they wandered in the desert, and guided them to the promised land: this same God now gives himself up to death.

It may seem odd at first that an all-powerful God would choose to go through such an ordeal, that the highest power of all would choose not to act, not to rescue, not to save.

Yet for us as Christians, this is no contradiction. For Easter is immanent, already on the horizon. We know that just a week from today we will be singing out in joy again.

For those first-century Palestinians, however, the outcome was far less certain. They had no idea that the tomb would be empty on Easter morn. No,

they would have cried with Jesus, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

For us, this is a powerful reminder that miracles happen in God’s time, not ours.

So often, we become like those ancient Israelites, taunting God to demonstrate mighty power at our command. They said it this way: “You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.”

For most of us, the words usually sound something like this: “If you really are God, take away the cancer now,” or “If you love me, God, lift this burden from me,” or “You who are so powerful, why won’t you just give me a little help?” Worse yet, we become like those chief priests, scribes, and elders. They said, “Let him come down from the cross, and we will believe in him.”

Our bargaining typically sounds like this: “If you will just heal this disease, I will believe in you,” or “Deliver me from this horrific situation, and I will be ever faithful,” or “Just let me have this one thing, and I will show my thanks by making a generous donation to your church, O God.”

But God rarely responds with a quick fix for our problems. And God does not make bargains with us. God’s saving help does come to us when we really need it – but not necessarily when we think we need it. Miracles do happen, but in God’s time, not ours.

Sometimes, we need to experience the depth of our iniquity before we can appreciate the joy of our many blessings. In the Twelve Step movement, they speak of needing to “hit bottom” before recovery is possible. In our Christian vocabulary, we affirm that we need to suffer death before resurrection can occur.

This is part of the pilgrim journey for us this Holy Week. Like Jesus, we give ourselves up to death, so that we, too, can be resurrected. We die to sin, to selfish ways, to all that has held us captive. We let go of our need to control, of our anger and our envy, of our intemperate love of power, status, and wealth.

And we give in to the love that will not let us go, to the power that will indeed come to our aid when we truly need it, and to the sure and certain hope that God is already doing more for us than we can ask or imagine.

## **Palm Sunday Sermons**

So let us once again muster the courage to look into the face of death this Holy Week. For us, darkness has now come over the whole land, and the curtain of the temple is torn in two. And the only way out is to trust in God alone, saying, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."