**Our Words for Jesus**

A sermon for Palm Sunday, April 9, 2017

By The Rev. Christopher Wendell

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Bedford, MA

I’ve never experienced whiplash before, but I’m going to go out on a limb and say it feels little bit like the Palm Sunday liturgy. On this day, our worship begins in a different place, with unusual energy, unfamiliar movement, a whole community procession, the rhythm of drums, the waving of palms and shouting of Hosanna!– all serving to create a sense of excitement and anticipation. But then, just fifteen minutes later, silence envelops us as we stand still in our pews and contemplate the last breath of Jesus as he dies upon the Cross – the culmination to a story of betrayal, denial, rejection, abuse, and shouts of Crucify! It’s quite the contrast.

The folks who put this service together in the 1960’s and 70’s did so intending to create this kind of starkness at the start of Holy Week. Many a Palm Sunday sermon has been preached under the title of “From Hosanna to Crucify!” the two words given to the Congregation to say about Jesus, just fifteen minutes apart. The idea then was to try to provide a taste of the full breadth of Holy Week all in one service – with the idea being that most parishioners would not be back in church again until Easter morning.

But today, there is a growing movement within parts of the Episcopal Church to think a little differently about how to observe Palm Sunday, nearly 50 years after this liturgy was first put together. It was not as common in earlier centuries of the church to celebrate all of the liturgies that dramatize the events of Jesus’ last week, even in Cathedrals, let alone in small suburban churches like ours. Hence the desire when our prayer book was last revised, to use Palm Sunday to accomplish the work of at least three Holy Week services. But in the five decades since, the practice of celebrating all the Holy Week services has grown throughout the church. Even here at St. Paul’s, we offer some kind of worship experience every night this coming week – culminating in the Triduum or “Great Three Days” of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil. This practice separates out each moment of Holy Week for its own reflection: the last supper, the overnight vigil in the garden, the stations of the Cross and Jesus’ passion, his trial and death, and ultimately the discovery of the empty tomb. With all the attention we now pay to each distinct moment of Holy Week, it feels to many like the first step in this sequence, Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, gets short shrift, in our rush to read the Passion.

All this is to say that, next year, when we celebrate Palm Sunday, that celebration will not include the reading of the Passion that we just heard. We will still gather in the Parish hall, bless palms, parade around the grounds, sing the familiar hymns, but we will allow the Gospel of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem on the donkey to stand as the Gospel for the day, and this strange, foreboding, exciting, conflicted moment to become a more reflected upon part of our Holy Week journey with Jesus.

We will still read the Passion on a Sunday next year, but we’ll do it a week earlier on Lent V. I’m committed to us continuing to read the Passion on a Sunday, and to preach about it, so that the bulk of congregation, including our older children and teenagers, can hear it, learn it, reflect on it, and wrestle with it. My hope is that it will serve as a signal of our turn towards Holy Week, in a way that then creates more space to contemplate the spiritual meaning of Palm Sunday the following week.

But for this year, we are left today with the Passion ringing in our ears -- with rich images and hard words that perhaps make us squirm a little. My earliest memories of hearing the Passion read at church are all coded emotionally with sadness and discomfort. As I child I wasn’t introduced to the story as a depiction of God’s persistent compassion and love for humanity even in the face of ultimate rejection. That’s what I believe it’s about now: about the incredibly capacity of divine love to endure, to not turn violent in the face of violence -- no matter how harsh the world is towards it.

Rather, I was introduced to the Passion as a story about guilt. Mostly about our guilt. We also read the passion as a play with the congregation taking the part of the Crowd. As a young person, though I liked being involved, I somehow got the wrong message from it. I ended up thinking that we read it that way because it was supposed to remind us that we, those of us here and now reading the parts, are the guilty ones. I’m not suggesting that we don’t occasionally abandon and turn our backs on Jesus. Surely we do. But our falling short in our lives of faith isn’t the same as being the ones who denied knowing him, who betrayed him to the authorities, who put him on trial, or who shouted Crucify! And for me, the whole experience of hearing the Passion became about feeling my own culpability for Jesus’ death, rather than pondering the incredible gift of what God is doing for us for the sake of the world amidst this violent persecution.

As an adult, I’ve become more able to reflect on the passion more dispassionately (pardon the pun). On the one hand, this has helped me understand it in a more liberating way: Christ’s suffering becomes a sign of the unbreakable nature of God’s commitment to forgiveness, compassion, and love. But on the other hand, it has opened my eyes to the way that early Christians were also preoccupied in how they told the story with assigning guilt for Jesus’ death. And that, especially for Matthew, nearly all of the guilt is heaped upon the Jewish authorities.

I won’t give you a line by line exegesis of each instance – there are many. But I will offer one overall observation that is important to understand as responsible hearers of this text. Jesus’ early followers understood themselves as a Jewish community in the first century, but one that was increasingly in conflict with the various Jewish authorities by the turn of the century. Tensions were high, especially after the destruction of the Temple in the year 70, about 15 years before Matthew’s Gospel was written down. Of course, all of us here know how vitriolic the political rhetoric can get when factions with competing world views are fighting to determine who will control the way forward. The key is to remember that the conflict was seen at that time as an internal conflict within the very broad and evolving traditions of Judaism – and not as a conflict between two different religions. But it was in this latter way, that Christians at various times and places throughout history, interpreted the Gospel language to authorizing persecution of Jewish people individually and collectively. Our task today is to remember that such demonization is the product of historical human relationships over the course of centuries, and not of any Christian theological claim to supremacy over Judaism.

With all the ways the Passion can be misheard by children or by adults – it begs the question, why continue to read it at all. Why continue to tell this story to each other, to our children, to strangers wanting to know about what a life with Christ is all about? And my answer is that it’s because beneath all these layers of vilification and demonization, of redirected blame and projected feelings of guilt, the Passion is our story of God’s unbreakable commitment of love towards all humanity. It is the story of how strongly the human heart can turn away from Love incarnate, and yet how persistent Jesus’ commitment to compassion remains through resistance, conflict, betrayal even death.

But as we read it, and as we hear it, I encourage each one of you not to just accept the words of the characters in the story as your own words for Jesus. Rather, to use the drama of the story to allow yourself to ponder the question: what are *your* words for Jesus in his trials. What would you like to say to him in this Holy Week?

Is it Hosanna? Is it Crucify? Or is it maybe something else. Is it Help me? or Guide me? or Where are you? or How could you? or Forgive me? Or Protect me? Or hold my hand? Or Deliver me? Or give me strength? Or save me?

What words are in *your* heart for Jesus this year? Whatever they are, let *those* words turn over in your prayers as we walk through this Holy Week together. Amen.