**The Unfamiliar Jesus**

A Sermon by The Rev. Christopher Wendell

Palm Sunday, March 29, 2015

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford, Massachusetts

In the early 20th century, scholar and future physician Albert Schweitzer published a book titled “The Quest for the Historical Jesus”. In it, he chronicled several attempts by writers from the previous century or two to create a portrait of who the human Jesus really was. He looked for points of convergence between the various descriptions of “the real Jesus” that scholars drew at different times and places to see if they pointed towards any common understanding. At the end of his analysis, he found something remarkably unexpected. In every previous attempt to define who the historical Jesus really was, the portrait of Jesus that emerged always reflected the values, attitudes and culture of the person who was doing the seeking. In other words, people were looking at Jesus and seeing themselves looking back.

Christians have a tendency to edit the Jesus we pray to into a version more accessible to our particular lives. This is not necessarily bad -- but it’s limiting. A Jesus too much “like us” can’t offer us the blessings of his difference, of the profound otherness of God, of the radical nature of true divine love.

I always think of this on Palm Sunday, as we begin the journey into Holy Week, because it’s the time of year when the church encourages us to just let Jesus be Jesus in all his difference. Beginning today we engage in a week of unfamiliar liturgies, which ask us to do strange things. We wave tree branches around. We wash feet. We gaze at images of Jesus’ suffering. We re-enact a terrible trial during which we call for the God we love, and who loves us, to be killed. We process behind the symbol of Jesus’ execution. We pray overnight in a garden. We kindle a massive fire and around its light tell the stories of God’s abiding love for our spiritual ancestors and for us. Our worship this week will look very different than the rest of the year – we re-tell strange stories and we do it in strange ways.

Most of the year, we try and relate the stories of Jesus that we hear in church to our own lives, to experiences and situations we find ourselves in. We try to make them more familiar so that we can embrace his teachings, maybe allow some of his moral courage to rub off on us. Most of the time we too, imagine Jesus as someone who shares our values, attitudes and worldview – and, frankly, embodies them even better than we do. But this week, the parts of Jesus’ life story that we recall are just too different, too ancient, too removed from our cultural time and place to look to for object lessons. The liturgies we celebrate this week are meant to alienate us a little bit from the Jesus we normally call to mind when hearing the Gospel or saying a prayer. They are meant to make us a little uncomfortable, so that we might become more aware of how we’ve let the Jesus of our imagination become a little too familiar, a little too human, a little too small.

The Palm Sunday liturgy, which recalls Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem with his disciples, offers us a reminder of how easy it is to imagine Jesus in our own image. His arrival in the holy city occurred during the middle of a massive annual pilgrimage of Jews from all around the region, coming to worship at the Temple as the celebrated the Festival of the Passover. Our Palm procession represents the journey not just of Jesus and his closest friends, but of thousands of Jewish pilgrims rushing to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. While this pilgrimage was an annual occurrence, in the year of Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem, everything was different. By this time, he had earned a reputation. In the Galilee, where he and his followers had been for the past 3 years, he performed acts of healing. He encouraged people on the margins of society and advocated for their inclusion in social life. He challenged injustice. He stood up to authority. He had claimed to be the Son of God, and others were calling him the Messiah. And now he was heading to Jerusalem – the Roman capital in this part of the Empire. He was heading towards the seat of power. And he was unafraid.

The pilgrims surrounding Jesus along the way, the ones waving palms and cheering him on, no doubt believed that he was coming to liberate them all from the military and economic oppression of the Roman army. The predicted Messiah would be the one to liberate Israel, the one anointed to bring justice and restoration – and given the brutality of the Roman army, it would be only natural for the crowd to assume that liberation would need to come through force. In addition to the present political situation, these pilgrims were coming to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover – the sacred story of God’s final act to liberate the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt under Pharaoh. To these faithful Jews, Jesus could perhaps be another Moses, called by God again to secure freedom from the hand of a mighty oppressor. After decades of taxation and victimization, of having their own political and religious leaders co-opted by the Romans, the Jewish people of the first century were ready for another Exodus. Except this time, they weren’t the ones who were going to be leaving. They believed a revolt against the Romans was coming, and Jesus would be the leader. They yearned it. The energy must have been electric.

But, as is so often the case in life, most of these pilgrims are seeing what they want to see in Jesus, rather that what is. They were missing the signs that Jesus was offering that he was different, that he wouldn’t fulfill their expectations of violent overthrow: riding in on a donkey, an animal of peace, rather than a stallion, an animal of war. Being flanked by a rag tag band of unarmed former fisherman, rather than a garrison of soldiers. What was coming in the days ahead would not be a revolution, but the offer of a far more lasting kind of liberation – a kind of liberation for all people, through all time and all space. And so, when the crowd’s imagined revolution never materializes, they can’t accept the revolution that is being offered. When Jesus fails to crush the army with power and might, the tide turns, and Hosanna becomes crucify. As the week goes on, even the disciples begin to turn away from Jesus, afraid of remaining at his side as the truth of his mission (and the consequences it will ultimately provoke) becomes clearer and clearer. He dies alone on a cross – which is the one moment that challenges nearly all of our attempts to imagine Jesus in our own image. It is the one moment in which Jesus can truly be Jesus: Fully human in his agony, and also fully divine in persistence to love and forgive.

As we journey through Holy Week together this year, I invite you to think about these days as a time to just let Jesus be Jesus. For Holy Week this year, maybe just show up. Maybe, this year, don’t work so hard to understand, to figure out how, or why. Maybe this year, just show up -- in your personal prayer, and at church. In your own relationship with God – no matter how close or distant it may be. Maybe don’t worry so much about anything except being present to God, in body, mind and spirit. Just let Jesus be Jesus, and bear witness to his journey…accept his story without shame, without fear, without self-loathing. Maybe, this year, let this week be about Jesus, and not about you. Maybe this year, just be his companion for as long as you can: on the road to Jerusalem, in the upper room, in the garden at midnight, through the trial, at the foot of the Cross. For if we companion Jesus, the real Jesus, through these last days on earth, he will be our companion still when we roll away the stone. Amen.