

Passion / Palm Sunday

March 29, 2015

Rev. Ken Wratten at St. Stephen's, San Jose

Mark 11:1-11a

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Isaiah describes God's obedient servant

Psalms 31:9-16

In your loving kindness save me.

Philippians 2:5-11

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

Mark 15:1-39

Passion narrative

Palm Sunday: The Sunday of the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ. This Sunday begins a week of enacting Jesus' welcome as a king into the city of Jerusalem, the last meetings with his disciples; the final instructions and teachings; the betrayals and abandonment; the tears, false accusations, humiliation, agony, execution and burial. We will participate in many details of this Holy Week over these next six days, but today's service compresses the top level summary of the end of Jesus' human ministry.

Jesus had been loved, honored, sought after, and followed. Peter, James and John at least, maybe more of them, were beginning to understand who he was. Why couldn't Jesus just stay under the radar of the powerful occupying Roman government; just out of sight from the paranoid Temple leadership?

Aren't we all familiar with the fine art of flying under the radar? You know, keeping ourselves quiet enough that we can go unnoticed by people we would rather have NOT notice us. I certainly remember my daughters sharpening those skills as little girls, to stay out of trouble. Well, actually, it was more about doing things that would get them in trouble, but doing it quietly enough that they wouldn't get caught. Our older daughter Candace had practiced it so well that she could pick on Laurie, and get her so angry that she would start yelling at Candace. When I heard the angry yelling, I would tell Laurie to stop acting so badly toward her sister – "Act like a lady." "But, dad." "Just stop it!" Candace knew how to fly under the radar from a young age.

We all know how to lay low when we need to.

When we look ahead and see a Highway Patrol car in the slow lane of traffic – we slow down even if we are already going below the speed limit.

When there is a need for somebody in a group to volunteer for an open job – we look really busy and make no eye contact with the rest of the group.

I am sure Jesus knew everything he needed to know about human nature, and could have easily avoided the outcome of this Holy Week journey in Jerusalem. But that is not what he chose to do. The Christian author Joan Chittister explains it this way, "These final days of Holy Week confirm there are some things worth living for, even if we find ourselves having to die for them as well."

Our family; principles that give our life meaning; defending someone being wronged who cannot defend themselves - What is it that motivates your life, that is worth living for, that is so important to you that you could see yourself dying to protect it?

Jesus had reached the point in his work on earth that he knew the stand he needed to take, and it was for a reason that made any hardship unimportant to him. He had come to Jerusalem as the nation was getting ready to celebrate the Passover. That was the celebration marking the night when the slaves of Egypt were given the means to escape their captivity under Pharaoh, and to begin a new life. Jesus had put every detail in place for his own Passover to his own new life; now it had to play out. And he did this in order to provide you and me with our own Passover. We Christians are also in a process of passing from the end of one kind of life centered on the things, and values, and attitudes of this world, to the beginning of a new kind of life centered on the reign of God – here and now, and for ever.

Jesus taught that life as we know it is not the reason we were born. That life is not the purpose of our existence. This life is a spiritual stop-over on the way to the new way of thinking and living. We are called to another way of life. That change in our way of living takes commitment, dedication, and willingness to do whatever will be necessary to take it on.

Jesus took up his cross in order to move into his new life, enabling the Holy Spirit to be set to work through each of us. He took up his cross so that we could see the importance of taking up our own crosses in life; because those crosses must be claimed and owned for us to model the life and share the life, that spreads God's reign into families that desperately need God present in the home; and neighborhoods that need God present in them; and a nation, and a world that desperately need God to reign in them. There are the large wooden kinds of crosses, such as the ones that Syrian and Palestinian Christians now carry; but there are small palm crosses too; like sharing our time or money when we barely have enough; or resolving an argument not to win but to resolve the argument.

Jesus knew that to fully live out the message he was sent to deliver, he had to step up, in full view, and be ready to die because the message was so important for us to hear and to make our own.

Prayer from St. Bonaventura (1217-1274)

O Lord, holy Father, show us what kind of man it is who is hanging for our sakes on the cross, whose suffering causes the rocks themselves to crack and crumble with compassion, whose death brings the dead back to life. Let my heart crack and crumble at the sight of him. Let my soul break apart with compassion for his suffering. Let it be shattered with grief at my sins for which he dies. And finally let it be softened with devoted love for him.