

Passion / Palm Sunday

March 20, 2016

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

Luke 19:29-40                      triumphal entry into Jerusalem

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Philippians 2:5-11                God also highly exalted him

Luke 22:14 - 23:56                Passion narrative

Jerusalem sat at the crossroads of the East; west to Egypt, north to Asia Minor, east to Syria. It was on a heavily traveled trade route. Merchants, traders, craftsmen, and swindlers filled the city. Jerusalem was also the capital city of Judea, and the home of Solomon's Temple. Every Jew who could manage it was expected to take the annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the celebration of the Passover Feast. Into this swirling circus of cultures, languages, and customs we enter today into Holy Week; the last week of the earthly life of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

We have read two Gospel lessons this morning; two stories that seem so radically different. But both describe a kind of pilgrimage that we are invited to join in.

The first Gospel lesson was the reading of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The people were honoring him as they would honor a king; waving palm branches and singing anthems. This procession followed the same form used to welcome kings and conquering generals over the years. But there were some striking differences: Jesus came with humility. He came riding a donkey instead of a war horse. He was riding into the capital of Judaism, bringing a form of victory, but not a political victory; not celebrating the success of a military campaign. This was not a typical king, or the typical reign of a king.

Jesus entered Jerusalem on a colt as a fulfillment of OT prophecy – Zechariah 9:9 “Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

How have you experienced Jesus entering your life? Have you experienced a slow procession throughout your life; or has it been more of a triumphal march on a particular day? How does Jesus re-enter your life very day? Do you “pave the way with branches”, or a prayer, or a spoken invitation, for him to enter in? Do you experience Jesus to be a gallant king on a war horse, or as a humble rabbi on a donkey?

The second Gospel lesson today is the story of Jesus' Passion; Judas leaving the upper room to betray him; Jesus praying at the Mount of Olives; his arrest and being taken to Caiaphas; denied by Peter; then taken to Pilate, then Herod, then Pilate again; his scourging, crucifixion, and death.

Sometimes Jesus will enter our lives through our own experiences of pain and suffering. He knows about that way; he has personally been there. Even God's own Son was not exempt from pain and suffering. Throughout his suffering Jesus

stayed true to his way of compassion and love. His first words on Calvary were of forgiveness, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing”. Jesus showed his love even from the cross. When one of the thieves asked Jesus to remember him, his response was out of all proportion to the request: He promised not only to remember him, but he said, “today you will be with me in paradise”.

When have you needed assurance and comfort when facing suffering or death? Jesus has been there, and offers himself to us when we find ourselves in that place, or when people we love are in that place. Jesus triumphed in overcoming everything that hatred, greed, and fear could throw at him; he replaced all of that violence with grace. Jesus offers us the grace of his presence when we are there for loved ones who are suffering or dying; or when it is our own time.

I have been told that being with a family during the death of a loved one is to be on holy ground. I have found that to be absolutely true. There is a sacredness in being present; a closeness to God that is felt. Have you experienced Jesus entering your life through suffering, or pain, or death of a loved one?

Today’s Gospel stories tell about two contrasting events in the life of Christ; this being the day of Palms, and the day of his Passion. We honor the triumphal entry that will lead to Jesus’ death, and we honor the agony of his Passion that will lead to new life.

The triumphal marches into Jerusalem and to Calvary are ways Jesus presents himself to us, as the humble servant; as the triumphal Lord; and as the loving and compassionate Son of God, exchanging violence and dysfunction with grace.

Throughout the coming week, accept the invitation by the church to walk with Christ on the journey to Easter morning. Reflect on the triumph of his entering Jerusalem as a humble king, and the triumph of fulfilling his journey to the cross. Reflect on ways and times that Jesus has entered into your life. Consider times and circumstances that call you to deliberately invite him into your life.

Let us pray. Loving God, help us discern Jesus’ humble servanthood at work through us. Help us be strong in our resolve to keep to our own journey of faith. And use us to bring his love and compassion into the world. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.