

The Self-Emptying King

Mark 11:1-11 & Philippians 2:5-11
Palm / Passion Sunday - March 24, 2024
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The following story was told to me so long ago, I cannot remember who to credit:

Toward the end of the Vietnam War, a mortar shell hit an orphanage in a little out-of-the-way village. It was inadvertent and unintentional so the American soldiers went to help; some were doctors and nurses.

Two children died and several were severely injured and one required massive blood transfusions, but blood for transfusions was in short supply. The type was not the same as the doctors or nurses, so in pigeon Vietnamese and broken French, they tried to communicate with the children that this little girl needed blood and they needed to take blood from someone else and give it to her. They tested them all and rounded up the ones with the same type and explained that they were the only ones who could help. They couldn't communicate very well, but they got across the idea that if someone didn't give their blood; the little girl would die.

One little boy, named Heng, raised his hand and said that he was willing. They laid him on a gurney and began the process. They put an IV needle into his arm and began to draw blood. As his blood was flowing out through the tube, Heng began to sob and sob and sob. They asked in their broken French if they were hurting him and he assured them that he was not in any pain, but he continued to cry.

A Vietnamese nurse came in just then and she was able to translate. They asked her to find out why he was crying so hard. As she spoke with him, he quit sobbing and began to smile.

The American doctor and nurses asked: "What did you say to him?"

She answered, "Well I asked why he was crying and he said that he was giving up all his blood and that he would die."

The doctors were amazed by his imagined sacrifice. They asked the nurse to ask him why, if he thought he was going to die, he would do this.

The answer came back: "Because she is my friend and I love her."

Such stories might remind us that Jesus had more on his mind than leading a parade on that first Palm Sunday; he had on his mind his obedience to the will and the work of God in this world, captured so well in the words of Paul:

**Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross**

There is always a great discussion amongst those who plan liturgical calendars of whether or not this is Palm Sunday alone or Palm / Passion Sunday. Those who advocate the latter are convinced that good

Christian folks will merely skip over the darkness of Holy Week and glide from one jubilant, festive Sunday to another.

I have faith in you that you will, as good followers of Jesus Christ, consider closely what is really being offered to us on Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week. I believe that you will see the meaning and the sacrifice in all the pomp and palm-waving ... you will see that though the crowds had certain expectations of Jesus Christ, he himself knew what he was called to do and be in this world and he didn't evade it.

William Sloan Coffin, late-great pastor of the Riverside Church in NYC had this to say:

The jubilant multitude fully believed that Jesus was sent by God, but they misapprehended entirely the purpose for which he was sent. The kingdom of their expectation was totally different from the kingdom Jesus meant to found. His warfare was not with the legions of Rome, against whom this Jewish patriotism and indomitable courage and easily aroused enthusiasm might well count for something. His was with principalities and powers a thousand-fold stronger: the demons of hatred and jealousy, of racism and violence, of lust for money and power, of carnality and selfishness. So, though the sky on Palm Sunday seemed bright without a cloud, [Jesus] knew the throne awaiting him was a cross, that his coronation would be his brow's reception of every thorn and sting and burden that human sin had brought into the world.

If what Dr. Coffin said was right, and I think it is, then we, as followers of Jesus Christ, need to have accurate expectations about what Christ's entry into Jerusalem and into our very hearts is really all about.

Jesus does not take Jerusalem by storm or by force. Jesus does not take the world by storm or by force. Jesus does not take our hearts and souls and minds by force. This very fact seems to have been a disappointment to Christians and the critics of Christianity alike over the centuries that have intervened between that original Palm Sunday and now. Many have determined that the Christian faith has no power connected with it, while others have found that the power of the Christian faith is seen is something quite unexpected and rather counter-cultural if we could say: humility and obedience to love seen as weakness.

The planners of the Palm Sunday procession into Jerusalem that day were consumed with their expectations that Jesus was going to take Jerusalem by storm. The vanquishing King, the Son of God, the Messiah, was going to come riding in on a battle-stallion ready to vanquish all the unbelievers and those who had laughed in derision at the disciples and the Roman oppressors alike. To those who planned the great parade, everyone was finally going to get their just desserts. And then Jesus had other ideas.

Jesus's self-emptying entrance into Jerusalem amid all the hoopla of a grand parade of victory should cause each one of us to consider quietly just how we operate in this world. Are we the ones who are armed-to-the-teeth either actually or metaphorically, ready to do some kind of battle with those whom we consider to be enemies or at least competitors to the throne that we wish to acquire? Are we the ones who will be taken by surprise by these humiliating and humbling actions of our Lord and Savior on this bright sunny, Sunday morning at the gates of Jerusalem?

I hope not. I don't think we are, for if we have been paying attention all along during Lent (and the rest of the year as well), we know that we have no place to stand before God or others without a great deal of humility and an ample amount of kindness. We should know by now that our way in the world must be formed by the example that we have received in Jesus Christ, the one who did not consider equality with God as something to be grasped.

Of course, this portends something about how we live as followers of Jesus Christ. We are called to imitate our Lord in the manner of living – seeking for the things of peace and grace in this world over and above any desire to take first place or be grasping at being God-like. We are called to be servants of God's grace in this world, in all of our relationships and in our relatedness to this world. This is the expectation that God has of us. And this is about to be again definitively demonstrated in the events of Holy Week; God in Jesus Christ not taking us by storm or by force, but instead God will capture our hearts and minds and very lives by sacrifice and a willingness to be our self-emptying King and Lord.