

Palm Sunday, 2 April 2023
Saint Aidan's Episcopal Church, Portland OR
The Rev'd Canon Raggs Ragan

In the Name of the Lord of Love who lived and died and rose, all for love of us. Amen.

Here we are again on Palm Sunday, one of the longest and most elaborate liturgies of the Church year, following a pattern used throughout the Christian world for a millennium and a half.

We begin in triumph and end in death. In this one service we experience the entire drama of Holy Week, with shouts of 'Hosanna' to begin the week and 'Crucify him' to end it. This will be a briefer than usual homily, because the service says so much.

This is a dramatic, overwhelming day in which we move from the heights of joy at the entry into Jerusalem down to the depths of despair at the end of the Passion reading. It is very tiring and requires our whole attention. We surrender ourselves to the Church and allow ourselves to be carried along, to the heights of the procession, with people cheering and proclaiming Jesus their king and Messiah, filled with energy and hope that the world will be transformed so that all will be free and happy in God's Kingdom. It is intoxicating. We follow Jesus and the singing crowd into Jerusalem.

Here in Jerusalem, we find Jesus confronting the various authorities with a stake in keeping things as they are. Temple officials, political officials, and Roman occupation forces all see this king, who fills people's hearts with joy and healing and hope, as a threat. And the people themselves quickly turn on him. How easy it is for them, for us, to reject this remarkable offer of God, in favor of what we know and feel we can control.

Fear, fear of the new, fear of the unexpected, fear of what we cannot control, is a powerful force in all of us and can lead to rejecting the very things we most need. It is easier to become part of the mob, part of 'everyone', than it is to step aside to listen and think, to allow God to move our hearts so we can stay with Jesus when the crowd turns.

For the crowd does turn. The same people who shout 'Hosannah!' are pulled by the insidious fear of the powerful into a rage and panic in which they shout 'Crucify him!' just a few days later. They then follow this strange and beaten healer up Calvary to watch him die. They go from exultation to fear to rage to confusion. And we follow them. We become part of the mob, recognizing ourselves in it, committing ourselves to stay the course. It can be a thoroughly unnerving experience, but an essential one if we are to be who God calls us to be.

Every time we gather for Eucharist we are reminded that we share in Jesus' life insofar as we share in his suffering and death. Many of us have been taught to approach the altar with the words, 'Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.' That is how we are called to take this journey of Holy Week, the most important and anxious and worrisome of the Church year, to make the journey with Jesus as part of the fickle mob, recognizing ourselves in these people, sharing in the shouts of Hosannah with hope-filled excitement, sharing in the puzzlement and awe of the Last Supper, the betrayal and agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, the raging shouts of rejection at the trial, the desolation of Calvary. Recognizing ourselves in this ancient crowd, joining in the drama and the shouting, enables us to see ourselves as the needy people Jesus came to love and to save.

If we have no part in the action of Holy Week, we have no part in Easter. But we do have a part in both. The salvation is for us. And because we are the Body of Christ, we trust ourselves to the Church and her traditions, to endure this emotional and difficult time, to go up to Jerusalem and experience the expectation and the disappointment, the acclamation and the rejection. We trust that the journey is good for us, that this journey taken by Christians throughout two millennia, will take us also not only to Calvary but beyond it to the fully realized promise of God.

Lent is a long slow journey, deeper into ourselves, deeper into our relationship with God. It is a walk

through hills and valleys. But Holy Week is a rollercoaster ride. I hate rollercoasters, physical or figurative. I do not willingly leap into emotional chaos or confusion. But I do climb into this emotional, spiritual rollercoaster and fasten myself in for the whole ride each year – twice. Today we are dashed through the whole course, up to the top of the Palm Procession and then down through the confusion and chaos to the stomach-wrenching pit of the Crucifixion and death. Then we go through it all again more slowly and deliberately during the course of the week, with more time to experience the amazement at the foot-washing and the offer of Jesus' own self in the food of the Last Supper, the agony in the Garden, the waiting and watching through that last long night, the ups and downs of the various trial moments, the long excruciating climb up the Via Dolorosa to the top of Calvary and the Cross, the mockery, and ultimately the death of the Lord of Glory, the utter, silent desolation after all the shouting.

It is exhausting. It is also a necessary part of healing. We experience together the weakness and unreliability of our human loyalties, and the utter faithfulness of God in Christ, who submits himself willingly to our rejection only to return from death and offer us his love, totally, unconditionally, undefeated.

All human beings are weak and suffering, in need of healing and reconciliation. We are fortunate because we have heard the voice of God's Christ calling us to come with him, promising us new life, the life that can only come to those who have fully experienced death.

Most gracious and loving God, look with mercy on your humble people; give us strength and courage to follow faithfully through the dark days of this week, to remain steadfastly with Jesus, to learn all that you would teach us, and to come at last through the darkness into your most glorious light. Amen.

2 poems for Palm Sunday. I love them both.

Coming to a City Near You by Carol Penner

Courtesy Journey with Jesus.

Jesus comes to Jerusalem, the city nearest you.
Jesus comes to the gate, to the synagogue,
to houses prepared for wedding parties,
to the pools where people wait to be healed,
to the temple where lambs are sold,
to gardens, beautiful in the moonlight.
He comes to the governor's palace.

Jesus comes to Jerusalem, the city nearest you,
to new subdivisions and trailer parks,
to penthouses and basement apartments,
to the factory, the hospital and the Cineplex,
to the big box outlet centre and to churches,
with the same old same old message,
unchanged from the beginning of time.

Jesus comes to Jerusalem, the city nearest you
with his Good News and...
Hope erupts! Joy springs forth!
The very stones cry out,
"Hosanna in the highest,
blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"
The crowds jostle and push,
they can't get close enough!
People running alongside flinging down their coats
before him!
Jesus, the parade marshal, waving, smiling.
The paparazzi elbow for room,
looking for that perfect picture for the headline,
"The Man Who Would Be King".

Jesus comes to Jerusalem, the city nearest you
and gets the red carpet treatment.
Children waving real palm branches from the florist,
silk palm branches from Walmart,
palms made from green construction paper.
Hosannas ringing in churches, chapels, cathedrals,
in monasteries, basilicas and tent-meetings.
King Jesus, honored in a thousand hymns
in Canada, Cameroon, Calcutta and Canberra.

We LOVE this great big powerful capital K King Jesus
coming in glory and splendor and majesty
and awe and power and might.

Jesus comes to Jerusalem, the city nearest you.
Kingly, he takes a towel and washes feet.
With majesty, he serves bread and wine.
With honour, he prays all night.
With power, he puts on chains.
Jesus, King of all creation, appears in state
in the eyes of the prisoner, the AIDS orphan, the crack
addict,
asking for one cup of cold water,
one coat shared with someone who has none,
one heart, yours,
and a second mile.
Jesus comes to Jerusalem, the city nearest you.
Can you see him?

G.K. Chesterton (1874–1936) captures Palm Sunday
from the perspective of the donkey that Jesus rode.

The Donkey

When fishes flew and forests walked
And figs grew upon thorn,
Some moment when the moon was blood
Then surely I was born;

With monstrous head and sickening cry
And ears like errant wings,
The devil's walking parody
On all four-footed things.

The tattered outlaw of the earth,
Of ancient crooked will;
Starve, scourge, deride me: I am dumb,
I keep my secret still.

Fools! For I also had my hour;
One far fierce hour and sweet:
There was a shout about my ears,
And palms before my feet.