

## Palm Sunday, Year A

2 April 2023

### *Matthew 27:11-54*

There is an awkwardness about Palm Sunday. There is a swift move from Christ's Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem towards the crucifixion a week later, all of which we remember in the first half of our service this morning. Our liturgy began with the words that the crowd shouted to their Messiah as he entered the Holy City, "Hosanna!" which means, "save us!" to the crowd shouting at Jesus standing before Pilate, "let him be crucified!" It seems like it all happens so fast. But if we think about it for a moment, that's kind of the way life goes, isn't it?

If you were told that you only had one week left to live, the time would fly by. The anticipation of Palm Sunday, of the reading of the Passion narrative which expounds on Jesus' humiliating and excruciating death, it's uncomfortable. For my part, year after a year, it leaves me with a sinking feeling in my stomach. It's a physical reaction to a physical reality, eventuality, which is death. There is a kindness in our not knowing the hour of our own deaths. If the thought of death makes us uncomfortable, the anticipation of arriving at this moment would just do us in. This is because we are created for life. Our inmost being rebels against the thought of death. So, whatever it is that you were feeling this morning, know that you come by honestly.

Birth and death are the bookends of each of our lives; we know and accept this to be true. But how often we when are confronted with the death of a loved one, or friend, the question that we ask ourselves is 'why'? Why now? Why them? Why; what was the meaning of this life? When we watch those whom we love die, or hear about children murdered in their classrooms, or about migrants who die afraid while trying to survive, we ask 'why?'. Why have you forsaken me? *Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*

At the end of his life, 'why?' is the question that Jesus asks God the Father.

It is ironic that the crowd, hearing this, thinks that Jesus is calling up on the Old Testament prophet Elijah, who was carried to heaven in a chariot of fire. They believed that Elijah was still alive, and that Jesus was bidding him come and rescue him in this hour of his death; so that he may leave this earth not by death on a cross, but by fiery chariot. They offer our Lord the sponge of wine vinegar as a sort of anesthetic to sustain him, long enough to see the arrival of Elijah, or to witness the agony of Jesus realizing that no one was coming to help him.

But Jesus already knew that no one was coming to spare him the cross. His cry to his heavenly Father is met with silence, as we confess: he was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. Why could he not be assumed into heaven? Why did he have to go all the way to death?

Because we do. He went through it because we will go through it. Jesus, the Son of God, entered entirely into human existence. This is the action of a compassionate God who so

identifies with us that he shares in the experience of death; not for the sake of identification, but for us and for our salvation.

You see, Jesus' dying reverses death. There is an undeniably strange occurrence recorded in Matthew, where immediately following the death of our Lord, the tombs of saints are split open and their bodies come back to life, making their way through Jerusalem. Before Jesus' death, the journey from life to death was a one-way street. But now, the road is open both ways; a return to life is possible, not only for those who die after Christ, but for all people, for all time. World without end.

World without end, indeed. Paul reminds us in the Christ hymn from Philippians this morning that the events of Palm Sunday, of Holy week, leading to Jesus death, are not an end, but pivotal moments in a much bigger story. The hymn tells the story of Christ's self-emptying, assuming human likeness, his obedience to death on a cross. But this is only the first half of the hymn...

Therefore God exalted him even more highly  
 and gave him the name  
 that is above every other name,  
<sup>10</sup>so that at the name given to Jesus  
 every knee should bend,  
 in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
<sup>11</sup>and every tongue should confess  
 that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
 to the glory of God the Father.

This hymn ends with exultation and glory. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," are the opening words to Psalm 22, and *this* is how the Psalm ends:

To him,<sup>[j]</sup> indeed, shall all who sleep in<sup>[k]</sup> the earth bow down;  
 before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,  
 and I shall live for him.<sup>[l]</sup>  
<sup>30</sup>Posterity will serve him;  
 future generations will be told about the Lord  
<sup>31</sup>and<sup>[m]</sup> proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,  
 saying that he has done it.

Victory is where we are headed. You know this. The celebration of Christ's victory is a more comfortable Sunday for us. We love the victory, amen? But there is no victory apart from the cross. In her book *The Crucifixion*, Fleming Rutledge writes: "The crucifixion is the touchstone of Christian authenticity, the unique feature by which everything else, including the resurrection, is given its true significance," (Rutledge 44). Victory is given its true significant by death.

So, linger here for a while, during this Holy Week. It is not a place of loneliness or abandonment; Christ is here first. Let us dwell with him here for now, and journey with him to the cross in these coming days. Amen.