

25 March 2018

### Short-Term Praise

Mark 11:1-11; Mark 14:32-42 (Palm Sunday)

The palms of our procession this morning recall for us the story of Christ's Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. We read the account of that event from Mark, chapter 11, verses 1-11.

*When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, "Why are you doing this?" just say this, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately."' They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, 'What are you doing, untying the colt?' They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,*

*'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!  
Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!  
Hosanna in the highest heaven!'*

*Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.*

In so many ways, this is what we want church to be – a Triumphal Entry. Or at least a triumph. It was joyous, loud, crowded. There was a sense of excitement that was only increased by being shared with others. And it was more than just infectious group excitement; it was the excitement of being part of a group with a shared goal, a common purpose – all acting with one will, singing in one voice.

When we find this sort of feeling in church, it fills us with energy. This is the energy of the Methodist camp meeting, the tent revival, the youth rally, the Billy Graham crusade. And to a large extent, this is the energy that has drawn people to the modern Contemporary Worship service, which generally involves twenty minutes of standing shoulder to shoulder with a crowd of other worshipers, singing simple choruses loudly, looking up at a screen (rather than down at a hymnal). It is – at least for many – a deeply moving experience, and just as in the Triumphal Entry, a lot of it comes from being part of a crowd. We simply sing better and with more energy in crowds. The composer and church musician John Bell says that if we're more than three feet from our nearest neighbor, we sing softly because we're afraid they might hear us, but if we're closer than three feet, we sing louder because we *can* hear them. It's easier to let go of our inhibitions in a crowd. It's even easier to believe. C. S. Lewis comments somewhere that it's easier to believe when surrounded by others who share our faith. It makes us less hesitant, less self-conscious, more . . . triumphal. As I say, in many ways, this is what we want from church.

So it's odd, when you read this passage in Mark, to see how indifferent Jesus is to the shouting. He does nothing to encourage the crowds. Quite the opposite. He enters Jerusalem, goes to the temple, looks around, then tells his disciples, "It's late. Let's get out of here." Now I've been to enough Total Quality, Good-to-Great, Unlocking-the-Leader-in-You conferences to know that this is bad. They *all* stress the importance of making the most of momentum. You get something that people are excited about, and you push *that*. After all, while it's hard to get a locomotive moving from a standstill, once it's moving, it's hard to stop it. There's another illustration, too, something about a flywheel. I forget them all. But Jesus has a whole crowd behind him, ready for his instructions, and he ignores them and goes to bed.

Maybe this is because he knows that crowd excitement is based on emotion, which changes quickly. And it will. This *was* the same crowd that a week later would be shouting, "Give us Barabbas!" Or maybe Jesus suspects that, as excited as the crowd is, they're excited for the wrong reasons. They think he's come to lead a revolution against Rome, and he hasn't. You see, one problem with group excitement is that it's not necessarily for a good and important purpose. The passion that stirs the crowd at a revival meeting is very similar to the excitement that fills the crowd at the Final Four, or at a Rolling Stones reunion concert (the "I Can't Get No Metumucil" world tour). The emotional frenzy you see at a youth rally is the same as that at a Packer game, or at a Trump Rally. To return to that C.S. Lewis observation: yes, it is easier to believe when we are in the company of others who believe, but we need to remember that in the company of like-minded people, it's easier to believe *anything*.

At any rate, Jesus doesn't seem impressed.

\* \* \*

Deliver us, O God, from easy Hosannas.

both from shouting praises to you in the excitement of a crowd  
and from reading the words automatically in a liturgy.  
Preserve us from praise that is based entirely on emotion,  
and from praise without any feeling at all.  
We would praise you as whole people,  
with our hearts – in song and smile, in dance and despair  
with our minds – in doubt and conviction, in certainty and question  
with our hands – in service to others, whether it is easy or hard  
and with our being – in the joy of life, and before the mystery of death.

Give us shouts of Hosanna when your blessings lift us high  
give us whispers of Hosanna even when we grieve or worry about our future  
and give us the memory of Hosanna in our darkest, bleakest moments of silence.  
As we enter Holy Week  
as we remember not only the entry into Jerusalem  
but the betrayal, the denial,  
and the cross.  
be every kind of praise.  
From glad Hosanna  
to Father, even if it hurts, thy will not ours be done. Amen.

\* \* \*

Four days after Jesus' Triumphal Entry, he has just finished eating his final supper with his friends. We read Mark 14, verses 32-50.

*They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I pray.' He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. And he said to them, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.' And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.' He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, 'Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour? Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.' And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. And once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to say to him. He came a third time and said to them, 'Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.'*

Jesus began his ministry on earth with a solitary vigil in the wilderness, but after that, we hardly ever see him alone. He is always in community. He has the Twelve, the disciples whom he chose to be with him, and the gospels also speak of a group of women who are a part of his regular retinue, along with many others. It's yet another reminder of how important it is to be a part of a community of faith. Even Christ needed it.

But some things you have to do alone. One of those things is come to terms with your own death. Another is trust in God. No one can do those things for you. Sharing a common faith is not enough by itself. A faith that can only stand with a crowd clustered around it, propping it up, is the weakest faith of all. Faith has to stand alone, too. This night, in the Garden of Gethsemane, as Jesus confronted his own death, struggled with his own fear, looked for a way out, and had to choose between either dying in integrity or running away, he did it alone. First he was alone by choice. Later, when he looked for support from others and found them sleeping, he was alone by default. Either way, alone he made his choice. He was going to trust God, whatever happened. "Yet not what I want, but what you want." Your will, not mine.

A vital, growing faith goes through stages. There are types of faith that are characteristic of different ages. For instance, let's talk about the faith of a teenager. Adolescents tend to have a fairly emotional style of faith that clings strongly to group identity. Remember the high school cafeteria – with everyone sitting in their designated cliques? That's what an adolescent faith is like. This is why religious youth rallies tend to be highly emotional group experiences. Now, after this stage of faith there is another one – in which a person breaks from the group and begins to develop an individual faith – no longer automatically accepting the doctrines and practices of her own tribe but rather constructing a faith of her own. Not everyone makes that move, move though. And not every church encourages it. We tend to want every church experience to be a loud and joyful group experience. It's what keeps people coming back. If we encourage people to develop their own faith, why do they need us? In terms of our two scriptures today, many Christians and many churches have gotten good at the Triumphal Entry but aren't ready for Gethsemane.

But this keep-things-triumphal strategy has backfired. We hear more and more about people who have left church – especially young adults and people in their late 40s and 50s – and, according to several studies, both groups are leaving for similar reasons. They began exploring an adult faith, thinking and acting for themselves, but they encountered resistance from their churches, which didn't *want* their people believing for themselves. So, unable to develop an individual faith within their faith community, these church refugees decided to go it alone.

And so we go back to Gethsemane. In the end, Jesus had to face the crisis of doubt and fear and imminent death all by himself. Ultimately, it's the only way to face such things. People who love you can care for you while you confront the darkness, but they can't do it for you, and they can't make it go away. But when you step out alone before God, that's when you can discover a Gethsemane faith, one founded on the deep trust that God is at work and that the best we can do is say, "not what I want, but what you want." It is at Gethsemane, alone, that we find the courage to face the worst the world can throw at us and still say, as Christ said to his disciples, "Get up. Let us be going."

The cheering crowds of Palm Sunday aren't bad. As I've said all through this Lenten season, we *need* celebration in church. We need the community of other believers. But now, as we enter Holy Week, we remember that the faith of group celebration, while real and true and necessary, is not enough by itself. We also need the faith that Christ himself showed, the faith that enables you to stand with courage when your friends are asleep, and the crowds have moved on, and no one is shouting Hosanna. This is the faith we remember this week.