

The Word of God: Displayed on a Cross¹

Palm Sunday 2020

I

I think Palm Sunday's a day of not only high emotion ... but of mixed messages: On the one hand, great hoopla and waving palms and shouts of "Hosanna!" On the other, we read and hear and face the crucifixion of Jesus ... almost crushing in its anguish and pathos.

Two moods that jangle out of sync with each other ... and of the two, I think we prefer the pageant, the parade, don't we? 'Cause everyone loves a parade. And I think maybe this "let's have a parade" mentality might cover over our discomfort at the sheer indignity of the cross.

But thinking about all this, we are a story-shaped community. And I think that's never clearer than on this Sunday, when we begin the story in one place ... in one mood ... and end it somewhere else, where "Hosanna" segues into "Crucify Him!" So where do you and I see ourselves in this story? And how can this awful story set us free and bring us life?

See, this is a shocking story, an absurd story ... and you and I are asked to live it, breathe it, walk it this week ahead. And on this morning, we're asked to actually endure this story of ours in all its gory detail. And in the week ahead, you and I are asked to walk with Jesus and His followers, to trail along behind and experience – like maybe the first time ever – this awful drama. And we're asked to do this with no thought to the end of the story that we really know so well, no thought to the empty tomb and the shout, "He lives!"

No ... you and I are asked to walk through this drama this week, with the "smell of death all around," in a mood of gathering darkness, with the rumble of thunder in the distance, with streaks of lightning on the horizon. We're asked to do this. 'Cause as someone's said, it's only when you and I have shared even a "splinter of Jesus' cross" that Jesus will have something more to give you.

And what a cup of sadness this story is. From the scene in the garden where Jesus is frightened for His life ... my Father, let this cup pass ..." so He pleads with His friends to stay with Him, to watch ... but they don't and then the torches and grabbing hands and contorted faces wake them ... and they abandon Him to the evil that simply overruns Him.

And so the drama plays out ... on a cross, where Jesus was strung up "like a scarecrow ..." with His flayed flesh hanging off his back on that tree, enduring the worst possible kind of pain, till He could feel no more ... till He finally knew there was no way 'round the pain but only through it. And as someone says, that knowledge apparently cost Him a great deal, cost Him so much that His last words in this life were, "My God, my God, why?" Why?

So ... if we were all here now, we'd wave our palms at the beginning of the service. But see, as it turns out, these palms are "signs for suffering," and not yet signs of triumph. And if we were all gathered here, we'd play our own little parts in this story, wouldn't we, shouting "crucify Him, crucify Him!" But maybe if you think back – maybe last year when you were called on to play your part – maybe you'd kind-of resisted being cast in that role. 'Cause of course I don't think you and I can even imagine, had we been there, that we would've joined with that mob in calling for His blood.

But as someone's asked, well ... what are the odds that you and I would've joined in the jeers and cries for His blood? Well ... the odds are that like the other friends who high-tailed it out when the going got rough, the odds are pretty good you and I would have taken off too. I mean, forget about that Friday on Golgotha, and look at where you were last Friday in Richmond.

Did you love God completely and your neighbor as yourself? Or ... were you tempted to hoard ... whatever? Did you see Christ in all you met ... maybe on that neighborhood walk, or in that street guy you passed by on your way to Kroger's?

Well ... probably not. Although it is true that in times of national crisis like this – a lot of creature-kindnesses have appeared here and there. But still, you and I probably went about our business as usual – at least as usual in this weird time we're living in right now, pretty much thinking about the best for number one, just as surely as Peter mumbled, "I do not know that man!"



See, I think these palms we blessed and that you can pick up later ... or the ones you have at home to stick up on the wall ... I think they're really symbols of our foolishness and our sin ... yours and my limits and our flaws. And they're also symbols of our suffering savior, symbols of His suffering people, symbols of the suffering of all creation and of you and me with it.

What an awful drama this is that we will walk this week. But then ... on the other hand, maybe nothing rings so true to the depths of human experience as the Passion of God. So stay with Jesus this week, stay where He is in this slow walk to Calvary, walk with Him on this way like somehow you're experiencing it for the very first time ... becoming hurt and amazed and healed in the process.

II

David and I have been watching a lot of movies these days of our confinement. And this last week we watched Martin Scorsese's Last Temptation of Christ. And if you saw it and remember it, in the film Jesus is shown as a vacillating, tempted man – I guess Scorsese

wanted to portray Jesus' humanity in all its rawness. And the film shows Jesus' last hours, filled with conflict and terror ... with inner struggle resolved finally only in His death.

And I think you and I know that our life, like Jesus', our humanity is filled with unresolved ambiguity, filled with conflict, filled with suffering and finally filled with death. So the same savior who cries "let this cup pass from me," whispers "not my will but yours be done" – whispering into the darkness as His disciples – who insist they'll stick with Him till the end and beyond – run at the first whiff of trouble. And then on Calvary, that one thief jeers, "If you're so good, save you and me both!"

Really meaning "please ... save us all."

Ambiguity ... mystery ... struggle at the center of the crucifixion, and at the center of yours and my life. So look at it again this week. 'Cause there's deep mystery here at the heart of this story ... mystery at the heart of it all.

See apparently, I guess salvation had to come through Jesus' rejection, suffering, and death. So let me try this. Here's one attempt to make some sense of the crucifixion. Here's the reasoning: Somehow "like had to unmake like." Like had to unmake like. You know, like a vaccine that causes the body to reject the flu virus, by injecting some of that virus or its derivative into our bodies – so like cures like. That's the idea.

So also with our salvation: Somehow death was cured by the Savior's death. And just so. This joyful Palm beginning is not and never could have been the end of the story. "Hosanna" had to shift to "Crucify Him!" if Jesus' saving was going to enter and repair the real world ... that ambiguous, suffering world where you and I live.

III

Finally, here's my final point. I believe this is the story at the heart of it all. And this is our story. The greatest story ever told. This is the story that brings you and me life, this is the story that's way down at the center of our life and hope. And this story gets told a thousand and one ways, told and retold, and in the retelling, our communities ... our lives ... are shaped.

So Holy Week, with all its intensity of ritual and imaginative storytelling, comes to gather us "round the one, true, holy place of our faith, Jesus Himself – Jesus displayed on the cross – displayed to the world as the language – the Word of our God, placarded on our journey of human suffering that stretches all along the roadside of history."

And so beyond this tragedy, I believe life is redeemed. What an awful surprise, the Passion of our Lord! Who would have dreamed of such a thing? No one ... but God. So take a good look this week ... and live!

Amen.

¹Palm Sunday, Year A, *Synthesis; Matthew* by Douglas Hare (Interpretation Series)