

"What the Lord Needs"

We've come to Palm Sunday and our reading from the Gospel of Luke, which somewhat curiously, does not mention palm branches. For that matter, Luke does not mention songs of "Hosanna" either. Particular to Luke's way of describing what happened the day Jesus entered Jerusalem that last time, there are none of the familiar elements that are traditionally part of our worship on Palm Sunday morning. No palm branches. No hosannas. One author I read suggests that if Luke's version of the event was the only one we had we would not call this day "Palm Sunday." We'd call it "Coat Sunday," because this is one of the few details Luke gives us, describing how the people laid down their coats or the shirts off their backs to create a poor man's version of a red carpet as Jesus rode into town. "Coat Sunday." Not much of a ring to it. I'm not sure it would have ever taken hold, picturing children parading around our sanctuary with clothing in their hands or singing songs of peace, although this is more in keeping with the theme of Luke's account. No, "Coat Sunday" doesn't lend itself to the same kind of festive spirit we expect on this day. So, what is Luke's Gospel saying and what are we to make of all of this?

As we wave branches this morning and sing our hosannas, it's not that we've missed the mark somehow but Luke's Gospel does challenge us to think more deeply about why we give Jesus all our praise and honor today. Palm Sunday is the beginning of the week we call Holy and the holiness of it comes from more than just Jesus' entry into the city. God's Holy Spirit poured into the life of Jesus at the beginning of his mission when he was baptized and the Spirit led him not only into Jerusalem but toward a final conflict with the authority and power of the world. That conflict would end for Jesus at the cross, where his crucifixion and burial became the way to a resurrected life. If we are going to wave palm branches today, we can't do so without acknowledging tears will be shed. If we are going to sing "Hosanna," we can not lift up that song without hearing the cries of the crowd just days later, "Crucify him!" If we simply jump from the enthusiasm of Palm Sunday to the glory of Easter morning without moving through the darkness of the tomb, we miss the true holiness of walking with Jesus through the events of his Passion. Palm branches are not the cornerstone of our faith. The cross is, and Luke's Gospel helps to shape a deeper and more life-giving experience of what it means to honor Jesus as our Lord and Savior. And so, I ask again, what are we to make of all of this?

Christian authors, Marcus Borg and John Crossan, wrote a thought provoking book a number of years ago entitled, The Last Week. In the book, they move through the final experiences of Jesus and invite us to think about his entry into Jerusalem in a broader way. Because it was the Passover of the Jews, we know the authorities in Rome worried about the turmoil that often arose among the people because of religious festivals. Rome needed to keep the people in check. Jesus had stirred up enough trouble in the region and for that reason Pontius Pilate, who was the appointed governor of the territory, was dispatched to go to Jerusalem to keep a lid on things. This is where it gets interesting. We know from our study of history that those who were under the rule of the Roman Empire were often reminded of Rome's control through public displays of imperial power. Whenever a high ranking government official came to a city a processional took place. Soldiers marched in formation. Horse drawn chariots carried the dignitaries along a parade route. It was a planned spectacle for the purpose of keeping the people in their place. In the book, The Last Week, we're invited to imagine the scene the day Jesus entered Jerusalem. Most likely, Pontius Pilate was entering the city on that same day from the other side. This is when our imaginations help us see what happened. Pilate's entrance was a stark contrast to the way Jesus entered the city. When Pilate comes we can imagine an imperial cavalry, complete with warriors on horses. We see foot soldiers, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting off polished metal, and the swirling of dust at the passing of the parade. And the sounds: we can hear the marching of feet, the creaking of chariot wheels, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums, and the murmuring of the crowd. The people were expected to line the streets to acknowledge the display. Trumpets sounded and branches were waved, and cheers, more obligatory than inspired, heralded the entry of Rome's representative. There was no doubt on Pilate's side of the city who had the power. Rome determined the people's destiny. When Pilate rode into the town everyone knew who was in charge. Well, not everyone. "Not so fast," says the Gospel of Luke. As Pilate's parade entered the city on the one side the gospel opens our eyes to see the humble image of Jesus entering on the other. There's no army. There are no chariots. There's no marching or drums or weapons. Some may look at the contrast between these two and assume the obvious. Pilate has the power. Rome is in control. Jesus has no chance and his band of followers are no threat at all. Again, not so fast. This sets into motion the events we call Holy Week. Jesus embodies the real power. We know who is in charge. God is calling the shots. The humility displayed in the way Jesus enters Jerusalem points to a divine mercy and love that no army on earth can ever conquer. As the week unfolds, Pilate and Jesus will come face

to face. No doubt some will point to the cross and say, “See, Rome won. Pilate did his job. All Jesus could muster was weakness and death.” Must we say it again? Not so fast. A holy power was working through Jesus. The path he would walk and the cross he would endure would ultimately shape the destiny of us all.

Fifteen years ago a controversial movie came out directed by Mel Gibson called “The Passion of Christ.” Some thought the movie was Hollywood’s way of sensationalizing the last days of Jesus’ life for the sake of big money at the box office. Others were captivated by the depth of suffering Jesus endured. However you may feel about that there is a tendency for us to think about what happened that last week like a film that rolls across the screen in front of us. We observe what Jesus experienced from a safe distance. Like a historical documentary, we’re interested in what happened but not personally involved. Luke’s Gospel wants it to be different for us. At the start of the Palm Sunday story, Luke says Jesus directs his disciples to go and find the colt he will ride. If there’s any question, says Jesus, they are to respond by saying, “The Lord needs it.” This sets the tone for everything Jesus experiences in his final days. The Lord needs our participation in the holiness of his Passion. The power Pilate wielded didn’t need anything from the people, except their fear and blind loyalty. The power Christ embodies needs us, our faithfulness and our lives. When the people laid down their coats that day, laying down part of themselves to be his road toward the cross, they were giving Jesus what he needed. And, he would ask more of them. He would need their presence at the table on the last night of his life so they could receive God’s grace when he broke the bread and shared the cup. He would need their grief and their trust, when he breathed his last and gave up his spirit to God. The Lord would need the openness of their hearts when he began to appear to them as the resurrected Christ, calling them to continue his ministry of love and peace.

I don’t think Luke’s Gospel wants to take away our palm branches and our songs of “Hosanna” today. Instead, the gospel wants us to ask, “What do we give to the one who has given all for our sakes?” The power of the Empire intended to keep the people in their place. The power in Jesus wants to take us to himself, so that where he is we will be also. Because of his last week we are given this Holy Week. Today we begin this holy journey with him. What our Lord needs is for us to need him. “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord” and blessed are we who give him all honor and praise.