**Palm Sunday**

**Sunday April 5, 2020**

**“The Servant King” (Matthew 21:1-11)**

This week is one of stark contrasts. Holy Week begins with a crowd of pilgrims singing, “Hosanna, blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” But it ends with an angry mob shouting, “Crucify him.” On Palm Sunday the crowds wave palm branches, welcoming Jesus the King. But on Good Friday, Roman soldiers place a crown of thorns on his head and mockingly call him “The King of the Jews.” Jesus’ criminal charge, placed above his head on the cross, only serves to amplify the irony of the situation – “Jesus of Nazareth *King* of the Jews.” We’re uneasy about this turn of events and we openly wonder, “What went wrong?” How could a week that began with such promise, with the return of the King, end with his desperate cry, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” What happened to the crowds that hailed him as he entered the holy city? We struggle to find an explanation for this dramatic reversal of fortune, only to be reminded of the fickleness of humanity, of the tendency within all of us to switch our alliances without much thought. But despite our fickle passions, God’s steadfast faithfulness eclipses what appears to be a chaotic chain of events.

The journey from Palm Sunday to Good Friday is an opportunity for each one of us to do some genuine soul-searching. We are invited to be a part of this story as we walk through Holy Week. Today, we welcome Jesus into Jerusalem, waving our palm branches and shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” On Good Friday, our shouts change to “Crucify him! Crucify him!” during the reading of the Gospel lesson. On Maundy Thursday, we break bread and drink wine, remembering Jesus’ Last Supper and the betrayal of Judas, and we might even wash one another’s feet. Good Friday finds us at the foot of the cross looking upon the glorious death and agony of our Savior.

According to the calendar of the Church year, this is *Palm* or *Passion* *Sunday*. The emphasis in most churches is upon the palms and the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. It is a glimpse of good news amidst of what will be a difficult and dark week. Typically, we have re-enacted Palm Sunday in our worship services with our children and youth playing the part of the singing, palm waving crowd. Some churches, however, try to do a balancing act within their worship services, beginning with the palms and progressing through the passion with songs and Scripture. In this way they show that you can’t have the joy of Palm Sunday without the deep sadness of Good Friday. Even as Jesus entered Jerusalem, he did so under the shadow of the cross.

The story of Palm Sunday is familiar to most of us. At the beginning of Passover Week, Jesus and his disciples entered Jerusalem along with other pilgrims making their way into the city. But Jesus decides to make his entrance in a very specific way. After instructing two of his disciples to go into a nearby village to procure a donkey and her young foal, he rides into the city on this beast of burden. The crowd of pilgrims recognize Jesus and give him a royal welcome by placing their cloaks and tree branches on the road ahead of him. They sing out the words of Psalm 118, “*Hosanna, Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”*  All four Gospels record this event (Matthew 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:28-38; John 12:12-19), but each Gospel writer highlights something specific about the story. For instance, Matthew emphasizes two things. First, that Jesus’ actions were in *fulfilment* of the Old Testament Scriptures (Matthew 21:4) and second, that Jesus’ manner of entry demonstrated his *humility* (Matthew 21:5).

Right after Matthew sets the stage for Jesus’ triumphal entry, he writes, “This took place *to fulfill* what had been spoken through the prophet” (Matthew 21:4). Matthew uses *fulfilment citations* like this onethroughout his gospel (Matthew 1:22; 2:25, 27, 23; 4:14; 8:17: 12:17; 13:35; 26:56; 27:9). It is his way of confirming that Jesus’ life and ministry was a fulfilment of God’s plan to save humanity as disclosed in the Scriptures. The Gospel writer is stating quite clearly that Jesus is the center point of history, bringing to completion God’s plan of salvation and Israel’s hope. This is a reassuring message for us as we walk through a Holy Week filled with tragic, chaotic and unpredictable events. It’s all part of a greater, divine plan.

The fulfilment of God’s plan can also be seen in Jesus’ words to his two disciples (Matthew 21:2-3). When Jesus sent them on their mission to secure his ride, he anticipated that the donkey’s owner might question their actions. Just tell him, “*The Lord needs them*,” he advised them. Clearly, God is in control. The story of the passion, then, is one that can be perceived on two different levels. On one level, the chaotic powers of darkness seem to win the day as Jesus is crucified. When he hung on the cross and cried out in agony, it appeared that might made right and the powers, both worldly and otherworldly, had triumphed. But with the eyes of faith, we can see a different story being played out. God was in control and Jesus gave up his life freely so that the divine plan of salvation would be fully realized. From day one he walked the path that would lead to the cross. Jesus was not a helpless victim; he is the crucified Lord, crucified for us and our salvation.

Jesus’ ultimate act of self-sacrifice on our behalf was in keeping with the humble attitude that characterized his whole life. When his disciples were jockeying for position within the organization, he taught them that greatness comes not from having power over others, but by putting yourself at the service of others (Matthew 20:25-27). Jesus offered himself as the definitive model for a life of service,

“*For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many*” (Matthew 20:28).

On Good Friday, Jesus’ life of humble service came to completion when he gave his life in order to liberate us from the kingdom of darkness. We catch of glimpse of this on Palm Sunday when he entered Jerusalem, *humble* and *riding on a donkey*.

When Jesus rode into town that day, the people welcomed him as a King, singing, “*Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!*” (Matthew 21:9). Certainly, Jesus was worthy of that welcome for he was and is the King of Kings. But his entrance into the holy city was the antithesis of the typical way that kings and armies entered cities. He came riding on a donkey, a creature not normally associated with kingship. Victorious kings normally rode fearsome horses, not lowly donkeys. Jesus did not wield the sword, ready to take the city by conquest. Instead, he came to serve others and lay down his life. He was a different kind of King. He was the Servant King.

Matthew emphasizes this when he quotes Zechariah 9:9 in his fulfilment citation in verse 5. The Zechariah passage reads, “See, your king comes to you, *righteous and victorious, lowly* and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey,” while Matthew quotes, “See, your king comes to you, *humble* and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” Matthew has intentionally left out *righteous* and *victorious* in order to place the emphasis solely upon the *humility* of the royal rider. The King had arrived, but his entrance was characteristic of one who had come to serve. He rode into town, humble and riding on a young donkey and in so doing, he challenged the popular messianic expectations of the crowd. He neither looked nor acted like the conquering warrior-king that everyone expected. By the end of the week, he would be victorious, but not in the way that people expected, not with a sword, but on a cross.

Before Matthew wrote his Gospel, another New Testament writer, the apostle Paul, would paint a similar picture of Jesus in his letter to the Christians at Philippi (2:5-11). Here, Paul declares that Jesus, even though he was equal with God, poured himself out and “*humbled* himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:6-8). This is our God, the Servant King. Matthew tells us that when Jesus entered Jerusalem that day, the whole city was *shaken up* (Matthew 21:10). In the same way, the entrance of the Servant King into our midst shakes us up for Paul exhorts us to have the servant attitude of Christ in our relationships with others (Philippians 2:3-5).

“*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.* *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.*”

This is how we follow the Servant King.

With the distressing times in our country and in our world, we enter this year’s Holy Week with a very real sense of angst. There is darkness and death, but we believe in God who overcame death and darkness. We believe and follow Christ who processed into Jerusalem on a donkey, who washed feet and broke bread and suffered violence and betrayal. And God’s love is more powerful than all of that. The experience of Holy Week and Easter reminds us that it is not enough to talk about death and resurrection; we have to live it. And that is the most challenging part of all.