

Palm Sunday, Year A  
Matthew's Passion Gospel  
April 9, 2017  
Bill Ellis

Palm Sunday sermons are difficult to preach, in my view, because the temptation to anticipate Easter is so very strong. I still remember the title of an otherwise forgettable sermon I once heard: "It's Palm Sunday, but Easter is Coming!" The title made the sermon superfluous; we don't really need to be sad now, because we know how this story ends; the resurrection will overcome and even undo today's events. Grief is therefore an unimportant emotion, rooted only in ignorance of what is going to happen. All any of us have to do to overcome this moment is to remember what is going to happen later. I suppose it is because I am dealing right now with the end of my career, but this seems to me to be a dreadful way to experience Palm Sunday, and an even more dreadful way to experience life itself. If our liturgy is in any way supposed to reflect our lives, then this way of going through Palm Sunday has got to go.

For Palm Sunday is two commemorations in one. It is first the celebration of what is termed the "triumphal entry" of Jesus into Jerusalem. Then it segues into the story of the crucifixion on the afternoon of the sixth day following that entry. We start with a sense of anticipation of the final popular vindication of Jesus, and we end with the deepest grief over the shattering of every dream we

ever had for this man, every hope we ever placed in him. Thus, the start and finish of Holy Week is encompassed in this one liturgy. That is why here at the Cathedral we transfer the entry gospel from the Great Hall to the main part of the liturgy, thus making the Passion Gospel the very last thing we hear today; it needs to be the last thing we experience.

The reason is simple; it is the last thing Mary experienced, it is the last thing the disciples experienced, it is the last thing everyone who loved him most and followed him longest experienced. All they knew in that moment is exactly what you and I know in such moments, loss and grief over the loss. You all know I don't believe the gospels are history - though they contain a few historical events - but one thing I am absolutely certain of is the grief we read about in the heart of Mary Magdalene, the disorienting shock the disciples expressed in various ways, that was all real, that was all historical. There would come a time when the death of Jesus would begin to be interpreted in theological terms that proved so durable they are with us to this day. But that time was not the moment of the crucifixion. Jesus' mother was not reflecting on the doctrine of the atonement as her son died; she was not comforted by the thought that now the sins of the world had been taken away. Peter was not smiling internally, knowing that the joke was on Pilate and the Sanhedrin, for in a couple of days Jesus would once again walk the earth. That did not happen, because Mary knew nothing about atonement theory and Peter had no notion of the resurrection, however anyone today interprets it.

If you want to know what they experienced, if you want to know how they felt, recall the moment of the deepest grief you have ever experienced. Don't worry about whether or not that grief was caused by something that seems unimportant now. Don't look at that moment from the perspective you have on it now. Just go back in your life to the moment itself, and you will have an idea of just what those people experienced. Maybe you will recall some self-recrimination over what you told yourself you should have done but didn't. Maybe you will again experience anger at how totally arbitrary life is at times. Maybe you will glimpse the void that inevitably arises when that which explains our lives to us suddenly has nothing to say to us precisely when we most need something to be said. Maybe all you will remember is the numbness that comes when the ache is just a little too deep. I don't know, because it is your moment, not mine. I have my own moment. All I am saying is the moment you recall was also Mary's moment - the various Marys, let me say - it was also the disciples' moment.

Then, realize something else as well. It was love that brought you to that moment. I don't mean love caused the loss, because that simply is not the case. I mean rather it was love that created and informed the relationship which caused such a sense of grief when you lost it. People do not grieve the loss of what they do not love; I have said this in I don't know how many memorial services. Grief is the price some of us must pay for love. And everyone I have ever known, no matter how deep their grief, has always said that the love was worth the price.

No one has ever said to me that they would have preferred never to have known the person they love the most, so that they might be spared the grief they felt in the moment of loss of that person. It has never happened in my experience. The love is always worth it. That, at least as I am looking at it now, is what this Palm Sunday is about. Palm Sunday is at least in part about the love which drew Mary and the disciples to the cross of Christ, for it is that love for Jesus which opened her and the disciples to the grief of losing him. I am hoping today it can be about our love for Jesus as well.

I realize there is a sense in which this is not only odd, but opposite of what the Church has taught. The minute people started interpreting Jesus' death in theological terms they began to talk about it as the expression of God's love for us. That theological interpretation of his death has dominated Christianity during its entire existence, and I believe it is crucial. The death of Jesus was about God's love for us; it was and is about God's love for the whole world, and I don't want anything I have said here to cause you to imagine I don't believe that.

But I also believe the theological interpretation at least sometimes gets in the way of experiencing the crucifixion of Jesus as it was experienced by the people who were there. All they had was confusion, sorrow, grief, maybe anger. We have none of that because we have sorted this brutal execution out theologically, rather than historically, and as a result we don't feel what they felt. Theology protects most of us from grief over his death, and therefore very likely keeps most of us from accessing the love that led to the grief. So today I am

suggesting we add something to the theology by flipping this whole event upside down. Today I am suggesting we go back before Christianity, back before Christian theology, back before the resurrection, to the moment that will end this service. Today I am hoping we can go back to the time before the crucifixion of Jesus was about God's love for us, so that we might experience the grief which comes out of looking at the crucifixion only from the point of view of our love for Jesus.

If you can do that, and I know it is very, very hard to do, but if you can then you are Mary, then you are Mary Magdalene, then you are Martha, then you are Peter and James and John. Then you are your own very deepest self, because then you are in the presence of your own very deepest love, and you know what it costs you, and you know that what it gives you is worth far more than that cost.

And more than any of this, then you are starting to look at the world from the point of view of God, which is to say, as Paul said, you are looking at the world from the point of view of a love which "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." A love which can endure the loss of Jesus is all of that and more.

Holy Week focuses on the suffering of Jesus, and that makes it a grief-filled experience. Because it focuses on his sacrifice, and - behind the curtain - his triumph (which is fine) it tends to shield us from the sense of loss those who were there first experienced, and thus, it shields us from our sense of loss not

only over Jesus, but also over those we have loved so deeply. I now realize that this isn't necessarily the best use of Holy Week, for to get in touch with our sense of loss is to get in touch with the depth of our love, and to do that is to see the route to our ultimate redemption both in this world and the next.