

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Passion Sunday...also known as Palm Sunday...is a tough day to preach about because there is no single theme for the day.

It starts with the triumphant entry by Jesus into the sacred and holy city of Jerusalem. St. Matthew's account of the Passion brings out the royalty of Christ, so use your imagination again with me this morning!

It is the holy Jewish feast days of the Passover in ancient Palestine. Jerusalem is normally full of activity, but more so at this time of year. Thousands more than usual jam the city during this season, all to give thanks to God at the great temple of Solomon for deliverance from Egypt and oppression and slavery.

The people are in a festive, joyous mood. Even though they are again oppressed and enslaved, this time under the iron rule of Rome, they have heard, whispered quickly among them, across the miles: "The Messiah has come! He is real this time! The prophecies are being fulfilled, and we will be free once more!"

For his part, Jesus does not act to dampen their expectation. The Romans have their own big, glorious parade entering Jerusalem on the other side...celebrating imperial power and the throne of Caesar, reminding us of the old military parades in Moscow during the Cold War, with all their missiles and tanks and so on. But, so here is Jesus...on our side of town, making a statement...riding into the city on the back of a mule. While Mark's gospel has the crowd crying, "Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is coming.", Matthew's gospel changes that. Focusing on Jesus as the Christ, this gospel's crowd proclaims, "Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

Then, our story gets turned completely around...and comes crashing down. Yet, Matthew continues...in fact, insists on preserving the royalty theme of Jesus throughout the remainder of the Passion:

- ! It is strongly underlined in the trial scene between Pilate and Jesus in verses 11 through 26;
- ! In the scene of the mocking by the Roman soldiers at 27 through 31;
- ! In the title on the cross, at verse 37; and
- ! In the mockery by the bystanders, at verse 42.

Why is that? What is Matthew's message with this treatment of the royalty of Jesus as the Christ?

If you have ever seen the film, "Jesus Christ Superstar".. a rock opera based on the last weeks of the life of Jesus....you may remember various scenes in the movie. During the various trial scenes, Caiphas as leader of the Pharisees was projected as the ruthless protector of Jewish tradition and life...while Herod looked like a buffoon waiting for a magic trick from Jesus, tempting him as did Satan in the desert.

But Pilate... He had no axe to grind. Nor was looking for some cheap thrill. But he recognized what he perceived was a tragic martyrdom waiting to happen.

Pilate was begging Jesus. Pleading with him to say something in explanation to save his life...and, when Jesus remained silent, Pilate started screaming in total frustration, wondering when he'll say or do something to save himself. Because Pilate saw the innate dignity of Jesus. The royalty, if you will, of his bearing and of his innocence...but did not, and could not understand his purpose.

We really do not get his purpose either. Because humiliation, and self-sacrifice, and the selfless, open, and complete giving in service to others is absolutely foreign to us, and foreign to the complete world about us.

The moment of highest royalty...or deepest humiliation...is emphasized by the cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Of all the words attributed to Jesus on the cross in all four gospels, this has the highest claim of authenticity, being preserved in the oldest tradition, and it expresses the meaning of the cross...the Pascal Mystery...more profoundly than anything else in the passion narrative. When Jesus ate with the riff-raff, he crossed over from God's side and put himself where he might seek for them to be saved and, on the cross, he carries this action to its lowest point. When we say "wrath of God", we mean alienation from God. The sense that God's absence springs from our willful rebellion. So, these words from the cross give the death of Jesus its theological meaning. His death is not just a biological event, but it is Jesus...not against God, but **for** God, enduring the most bitter consequences of that isolation, that alienation. The cry is not only one of the words from the cross...it is **the** word of the cross, the interpretive word that gives the cross its whole meaning as redemptive event.

Everybody loves a triumphant parade. A ticker-tape event down Broadway, so to speak. But, as we continue to wonder personally and privately about the Passion, in our confusion and reflection it helps to look at the Epistle reading for today: Paul's letter to the church at Philippi, which was known to the earliest church as a hymn. (Read it aloud again to the parish).

In **this** way...the deepest, darkest way...Jesus of Nazareth became Christ. In him, the cross becomes the redeeming Tree of Life...introduced in Genesis and finishing in Revelation, but realized on the cross.

May God deliver us from our limited sight and understanding, so that we may begin to recognize the Passion of God beyond the Palms, all within the relationship that we discern between God the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.