

Palm Sunday - Year A - April 5, 2020 - The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony

Hebrew Scripture: Isaiah 45: 21-25, Psalm 31: 9-16, Philipians 2: 5-11, Matthew 26:14-27:66

Palm Sunday for me is perhaps the most difficult day of the year on which to preach. Some years ago, there was a movie, *Amadeus*, which told the life story of Amadeus Wolfgang Mozart. At one point, the young Mozart had composed a special piece for a gathering in the palace of the prince-archbishop of Salzburg. At the end of the piece, there was silence as all looked to the prince for a reaction. "Too many notes, there are too many notes." said the prince. Mozart responded that there were just as many notes as there needed to be. I tell you that story because that is how I feel about Palm Sunday. There are both too many notes and just as many notes as there need be. A paradox. Palm Sunday is a paradox that attempts to ready us for the events of Holy Week.

This day always reminds me of the novel by Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* written in 1859. The opening line of that novel has become a famous quote. "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair."

The words would have been just as telling in Jerusalem on the Feast of the Passover. It was the best of times, for some, for the priests of the Temple who were preparing for one of the holiest days of their religious calendar. It was the best of times for the Roman governor, as there was relative peace in Palestine. It was the best of times for King Herod and his court.

For the Romans, Passover was a dangerous time. People from the surrounding countryside came into the city to worship and to celebrate the feast. The population swelled often as much as four or five times. Not everyone who came into the city was bent of a peaceful celebration. There were many discontented people among the Jews. Taxes were high, there were many who were poor and in want. There was a foreign government who ruled in what was to be the land promised to the Jews by God. There were many revolutionaries, young men who were determined to throw the Romans out of Palestine. There were small bands of insurgents throughout the country and Passover was a perfect time to incite riots. Not long before, 2,000 men were crucified, the Roman punishment for rebellion. It was the worst of times for the Jewish population who longed for a Messiah, someone sent from God to save them.

The Romans, knowing the volatility of the situation they were facing, routinely brought soldiers from Capernaum into the city as insurance against trouble. It was the worst of times to be a Roman soldier.

For many of the Jews who came to Jerusalem, it was the best of times as well, a time to gather with family, to feast, to remember God's blessings and to hope and pray for the future.

Too many notes, and all of them on a collision course that week in 33 CE. The week begins as does our service, with celebration. Jesus coming to the Mount of Olives, sends two disciples into the city to find and bring a donkey to him, that he might ride into Jerusalem in fulfillment of the prophets.

“Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the fowl of a donkey.” The Mount of Olives is the traditional place from which the Messiah is expected to appear. We remember that a “very large crowd” gathered, spreading palm branches and cloaks on the road before Jesus. In other years, we have gathered to collect our blessed palm branches, and processed into the Church singing “All Glory Laud and Honor to Our Redeemer King.” The crowd that day in Jerusalem sang as well. Their song and shouts of “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” brought great joy and hope to those gathered in the streets. It might possibly be the beginning of the best of times, the time of God’s intervention and redemption of Israel, the time when revolution was possible, the time.... For the soldiers, the rulers, for Herod and the priests of the Temple it was possibly the beginning of the worst of times. The Romans were a mighty force who could and would crush any revolution. Their patience had been tested before and the uneasy peace was fragile and with it the power of those who collaborated with the Roman government.

We are told that when Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking “Who is this?” A city of perhaps thousands of Jews waiting, longing for the Messiah was nothing less than a powder keg, a bomb waiting to explode. All of the signs were there. On the side of the Jews, Jesus appeared to be the fulfillment of what they awaited. He came into the city from the Mount of Olives, just as the Messiah was to do. He rode on a donkey, he was in the lineage of King David.

This might, just might be the fulfillment prophecy, this might be the longed-for Redeemer.

“Who is this?” From the perspective of the crowd, this was the Messiah. It was the best of best times, the end of foreign oppression and the beginning of the Kingdom of God.

“Who is this?” From the perspective of the Romans, it was the worst of times. This was one more in a long line of rabble rousers, men who incited the Jews to riot, riot that had to be forcibly put down at the cost of injury and death to some of the soldiers. It was the worst of worst times for this to happen when the city was so full of people. It was the worst of worst times when the Romans and their friends were so outnumbered and when they faced a crowd who believed that God was on their side.

The Gospel for today takes up the story of the next week, a concise

summation of all that followed that day in Jerusalem. Jesus is tried, abused, crucified and dies. Today is an invitation, the invitation to walk the next week, the week we call Holy, with Jesus and his disciples to the foot of the cross and beyond. It is an invitation to answer the question posed by the crowd in

Jerusalem. It is an invitation to answer for ourselves once again, the question that has been posed for centuries. "Who is this?" Who is this Jesus, who we have come to call Christ?

The invitation is here and now to walk this journey with Jesus. The way is difficult, the story distressing. We are invited, even urged to walk this week and especially the last three days of the week, with Jesus, through his trial, abuse, crucifixion and death. We are invited.

As we well know, the story doesn't end at the foot of the cross. Awful as the walk with Jesus is, through all that is yet to come, it is not the end. Easter is coming....hold on.