

Palm Sunday – Year B – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony - 03-28-2021

Isaiah 50: 4-9a, Psalm 31: 9-16, Philippians 2: 5-11, Mark 15: 1-47

I have always found Palm Sunday to be one of the most difficult of all times to preach. Difficult not because there is too little material but because there is too much. We see Jesus making a triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the city of David. The crowd is full of excitement and anticipation. Finally, finally it seems like God has acted and sent the Messiah to restore the earthly kingdom of Israel. The Jews have been preparing for this moment for a long time. Centuries. We have been preparing for this moment for a long time as well, all of Lent and all of the Lents through which we have lived in years past.

We know as the crowds do not, what will happen in a few short days. The crowds will turn from excitement, adoration and anticipation into a mob screaming crucify him, crucify him. Pilate would have released Jesus, finding no fault with him but the crowd prefers Barabbas, a murderer and rebel. Why the change from adoring Jesus to loathing him?

There are many reasons, but the most prevalent were fear and failed expectations. The crowd expected that God would simply remove all of the obstacles that separated the people from their desires without their having to do anything. But the army of angels led by Michael the Archangel did not appear with swords of fire to eradicate the Romans. When the individuals in the crowd had time to think about their actions they became fearful. What would be the cost, would they pay a penalty, would the Romans respond with punishment, would they be destroyed? It takes courage to act in defiance of the world and follow Jesus. Even Peter denied him three times.

When have we been like one in the crowd, excited, full of anticipation and then when following Jesus becomes difficult and frightening, do we give in to fear as well? Have we ever stood in the adoring crowd only to become like Peter, denying who Jesus is and what Jesus asks of us? Of course we have. We are after all, human. The hope and salvation in those moments of fear is forgiveness, courage, and the strength to repent and change. Day by day, month by month we become more closely the disciples God is shaping us to be. We become more faithful.

The rest of this week is the story of crucifixion and death. Today we hear the story of the whole of the week. We know what is coming but we have yet to walk those steps with Jesus. The Last Supper, the Garden of Gethsemane, the arrest, scourging, trial and nailing to the cross are yet to come. This is the week that we re-member, literally re-live the week called Holy.

Many people in the story to come stand out. Some are frightened, some are questioning, some are brave, and some are confused or disbelieving. Which are we? Are we sometimes a bit of each or even all at the same time? As we walk the week to come it is well to be aware of how we are feeling, which of those emotions we experience. Fear, confusion, questioning, disbelief or something else? What do we expect of God? What does God expect of us?

When we come to the conclusion of this week with Good Friday, we find there three people who have walked the journey with us and whose experiences are our experiences as well.

The first is the Roman soldier, obeying orders, standing guard so that no one can rescue Jesus from his fate. It is not pleasant duty, to watch a fellow human being die in agony. Most who have this duty become hardened and stop seeing the victims as human but only as objects who deserve their punishment. When have we been tempted to see one beloved by God and created in God's image in this manner? The centurion saw the way in which Jesus died. It was in seeing, truly seeing Jesus as a human being that he could see Jesus as the Son of God. It was in seeing with the eyes of faith that he was able to say: "Truly this man was God's Son!" It is in seeing, really seeing our neighbor, their joys their sorrows, their needs and their gifts that we can see Jesus in them and say for ourselves, I see, I see Jesus in this person.

The second person who stands out for me in this story is Mary, the mother of Jesus. She stood with other women at the foot of the cross. Mary must have been filled with memories. Memories of the angel Gabriel with his startling announcement that she would be the mother of God's Son, memories of losing Jesus in Jerusalem when he was a young boy, of wondering as he grew to manhood if he was somehow not quite right in his mind. Mary had memories of what people said of her son, of God's son. She must have been there those few short days ago seeing the adulation and excitement and then a short time later hearing the words crucify him. Mary is the example of faith that grows and questions, that comes to maturity only with age and experience. Her conversion unlike that of the centurion is a conversion over time, a gentle and growing realization that God is calling her to respond with a simple yes. Memories are here for us too, memories of the times over the years when our faith has made us able to say with Mary; Here am I, servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to God's word.

The third person who stands out in the story of the crucifixion and death of Jesus is Joseph of Arimathea. Joseph was a Jew who was privileged. He was a respected member of the Jewish governing body, with the ear of the authorities. Joseph was someone who could ask to see Pilate and would be granted an audience. He had "standing" in the community and thus had much to risk. Joseph was also described as someone who waited expectantly for the Kingdom of God that had been promised. Waited expectantly but not with preconceived notions about what that Kingdom would look like. Joseph had an open mind. He was like many of us, someone who often experienced the tension between the obligations of his faith and the demands of the world. Would he do what the world, the council and the authorities expected of him and thus sustain his standing, or would he do what he saw as essential to his faith. One was the way of relative safety, the other entailed risk. How often in our own lives are we called to make this kind of decision, between what would be a wise decision and what might be a risky choice. How hard it is sometimes to listen for the soft, gentle voice of God. Joseph heard that voice and chose to go "boldly" to Pilate and ask for the body of Jesus. When have we been asked in our own lives to choose risk over safety because of our faith?

Three very different people, a soldier, a mother and a respected leader. Three very different people, but all people of faith. They came to their faith by different roads, they expressed it in different ways, but they were all faithful in the end.

Faith is that which has brought us all to this place in our lives. Faith is that which has carried us through the hard times and the times of joy. And it will continue to do so in the future. Faith is the way we live rather than something we have. It is what stands under the decisions we make. And so for this year at least, the final stage of the journey to Easter begins. May your Holy Week be truly holy and blessed.