

Pastor Bill Sass – Sermon for Sunday, July 19, 2020

“Beneath the Cross”

Palm Sunday - Matthew 27:11-54

After years of wandering, Clint Dennis had come to that point in his life when he knew he had been missing something important. He decided to attend church. As he entered the church for the first time, he noticed people putting on long robes, tying ropes around their waists and wrapping headdresses around their heads. “Come be a part of the mob,” a stranger told him. It was Palm Sunday and the church was re-enacting the Crucifixion in costume. He would join others from the congregation and be part of the crowd that shouted, “Crucify Him! Crucify Him!” Hesitantly, he agreed.

Then, another stranger hurried up to him. “The man who was supposed to play one of the thieves on the cross didn’t show up,” he said. “Would you take his place?” Again, he agreed, and was shown to the cross where he would look on as Jesus died. Just then, though, something about Clint’s manner caught a member’s eye. He turned to Clint and asked, “Have you ever asked Jesus to forgive your sins?” “No,” Clint replied softly, “but that’s why I came here.”

There beneath the cross, they prayed, and Clint asked Jesus to come into his heart. What the church didn’t know then was Clint had been in prison for ten years. He was a real thief. Even after his release, he had been stealing cars and trucks, until he realized he had been missing something from his life. Beneath the cross of Jesus, Clint found his Savior.

The time had come for Jesus to make His way to the holy city of Jerusalem. He and His disciples had been traveling the country side. A crowd followed them nearly everywhere they went. Jesus taught about the kingdom of God which excited both the disciples and the crowds.

The disciples were thinking what would happen once Jesus entered Jerusalem, and took power. Jesus tried to tell them what would happen. He would “undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders, and chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day, be raised.” The disciples didn’t understand. “God forbid it, Lord” Peter exclaimed. “This must never happen to you.”

The crowds also had their expectations. They thought Jesus would not only establish His kingdom, but also overthrow the hated Romans. They thought something wonderful was about to happen and they were going to be part of it. On that first Palm Sunday, expectations were running high. Something was about to happen. Everyone could feel it.

And something did happen. FOR ONE THING, JESUS FULFILLED A PROPHECY. On the outskirts of Jerusalem, with the holy city looming clearly in view, Jesus sent two disciples ahead to find a donkey and a colt. Jesus told them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them, and bring them to me.” We are given a clue that Jesus is clearly in control of the situation. He was not a victim of circumstance.

He told them if anyone questioned them all they were to say was. “The Lord needs them.” Everything happened just as Jesus said it would. Centuries before, Zechariah had prophesied of this day. “Lo, a young king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he humble and riding on a donkey...” Jesus fulfilled this ancient prophecy.

Father Henri Nouwen, in his travels, found a sculpture of Jesus on a donkey in the Augustiner Museum in Friburg. He called it one of the most moving Christ-figures he knew. The fourteenth-century sculpture originally came from a small town close to Breisach on the Rhine. It was made to be pulled on a cart for the Palm Sunday procession.

Nouwen found himself drawn to this sculpture. He sent postcards of it to his friends and kept one in his prayer book. Looking at the face of Jesus, he reflected. "There is melancholy, but also peaceful acceptance. There is insight into the fickleness of the human heart, but also immense compassion. There is a deep awareness of the unspeakable pain to be suffered, but also a strong determination to do God's will. Above all, there is love, an endless, deep and far-reaching love born from an unbreakable intimacy with God, and reaching out to all people, wherever they are, were, or will be. There is nothing He does not fully know. There is nobody he does not fully love."

Jesus rides upon a donkey, fulfilling an ancient prophecy, but clearly in total control. He knows what will happen to Him in Jerusalem. Still, He rides on. He does not avoid the task to which He has been called.

It reminds me of a routine comedian David Brenner did about Superman in the movies. You would see Superman confronting one of the bad guys who would fire at him with a gun. Superman would smirk and throw his chest out; the bullets would bounce harmlessly away. But did you ever notice what happened next? Brenner said, "And when the guy ran out of bullets, he would throw the gun at Superman. And Superman ducked." He ducked! I'll bet you never thought of that before. Superman ducked. On the contrary, Jesus did not have to enter Jerusalem. He could have ducked his mission. But still He rode on.

MEANWHILE, THE PEOPLE CELEBRATE. Jesus no sooner got on the donkey, than the crowds erupted in cheering. They "spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road." People ran ahead of Him shouting "Hosanna." The time had finally arrived. Jesus was about to act. Jesus would enter Jerusalem like a conquering king entering the capital city to claim power for Himself.

The city was already overflowing with people celebrating the Passover. When they saw Jesus approaching, they came alive with excitement. They would be witnesses to something wonderful, something they had been awaiting for a long time. Spontaneously, they joined in the shouting: "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

One modern lady tells about the Palm Sunday celebration at her church. It was the tradition of her church to celebrate Palm Sunday with members marching outside the church waving palm leaves as they sang the Palm Sunday hymns. Because they knew Palm Sunday is only a prelude to Good Friday, however, the congregation was careful not to get too giddy as they did this. "We never feel like we can cut loose," this woman writes, "as those first Palm Sunday paraders did. Because we already know, as Paul Harvey said, 'the rest of the story.'"

It's hard to put your whole heart into triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem when you know what comes next. "So, the adults hold back, waving our palm leaves weakly and singing 'Hosanna' into the accusing air. And somehow, we think if we don't get too exuberant with the palm frond on Sunday, maybe we can escape the nails on Friday." The first Palm Sunday crowd was filled with excitement as Jesus made his way into the holy city. He was fulfilling prophecy. The people were filled with expectation. They did not hold back the celebration in any way.

FOR JESUS, HOWEVER, ABOVE THE SHOUTED "HOSANNAS," AND WAVING PALM BRANCHES, STOOD THE CROSS. As Jesus entered Jerusalem, "the whole city was in turmoil." The people were celebrating a dream come true.

Amid the hoopla people asked, “Who is this?” Notice people made the wrong identification. “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee,” they said. The people did not claim Jesus as Messiah, or Son of God, or Son of Man. Instead, he was simply a visiting prophet.

Kenneth Lyerly of Kenosha, Wisconsin was narrator at his church’s Easter cantata some years ago. He remembers as they were about to go into the sanctuary to sing, the pastor came up to him, and asked if he would be willing to carry the cross at the end of service. Kenneth agreed without giving it a second thought. “But as the cantata went on,” he recalls, “I had a lot of time between narrations, to think about what I had been asked to do.” From where he was standing, he could see the cross at the rear of the sanctuary. “As I thought about carrying it out, I had a strong feeling of not being worthy.” He thought someone else should do it. “I wondered why the pastor had asked me. Why hadn’t he asked someone else?” These thoughts distracted him from what he was supposed to be reading in the cantata. His eyes kept returning to the cross.

At the end of the service, the pastor brought the cross over, and handed it to Kenneth. He was struck by its size and weight. “It wasn’t a vey big cross,” he said, “but at that moment, it seemed very large, and very heavy.” The walk from the front of the church to the back seemed a long way. “A part of me wanted to get it over with; to get out of there, and put it down, because I felt very uncomfortable with it.”

Then something unexpected happened. “When I got into the narthex, I turned and watched as children started to come out of the sanctuary.” A little boy looked up and touched the cross. He asked, “Did Jesus really die on a cross like this?” “It was all I could do to say yes,” Kenneth later said, “but I did manage to get it out. I’ll never forget what happened next. His face lit up as he began to comprehend, probably for the first time in his life what Jesus had done for him. As I lay the cross down, I felt very pleased I had been given the opportunity to carry it.”

On that first Palm Sunday, Jesus knew before the week was over, He would be carrying a cross through the streets of Jerusalem. There would be no cheering crowds that day. He knew He had to fulfill God’s will. He had to give His life for a dying world.

You and I will spend the better part of this week standing beneath that same cross. Jesus fulfilled an ancient prophecy. He set His course. He finished His race. And He did it for you, and me.

Now we stand beneath the cross of Jesus. Like the crowds of long ago, we’ve sung our loud hosannas. Like the penitent thief, let us confess our need, and open our hearts to His love. Elizabeth C. Clephane put it beautifully in her hymn:

“Upon the cross of Jesus  
My eyes at times can see  
The very dying form of one  
Who suffered there for me;  
And, from my smitten heart with tears,  
Two wonders I confess –  
The wonders of His glorious love  
And my unworthiness.

AMEN.

“S.D.G.”