

Affronts, Insults & Indignities

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Palm Sunday, March 24, 1991. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 118:19-29; Philippians 2:5-11; Mark 11:1-11.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

1. Last Sunday, during Joys and Concerns, I announced that the trial was near the end, that it would go to the jury on Monday. I continued that a win wasn't a sure thing. We went into the lawsuit with the understanding that we might not win. Nevertheless, we felt that we were in the right and so we took the risk. When I said that last Sunday I was actually very hopeful. Our lawyers were wonderful, especially when they cross examined hostile witnesses. It seemed as though everything and all the evidence was in our favor. In fact, on the fifth day of the trial, the judge asked to see the lawyers at the end of the day. He told Church Mutual that he felt that Oxford Presbyterian Church was going to win the suit and they should consider an out of court settlement. At one point during the trial, while the jury was out, the judge seemed to express his own judgment in our favor. "Somebody, I don't know who, but somebody in that company made a big mistake in writing up that insurance policy." It seemed that the only thing we really had to think about was how big the settlement would be.

As it turned out it went to the jury on Monday. The jury deliberated on Monday for about 2 hours without coming to a decision. On Tuesday they continued their deliberations for another 2 hours. Finally they brought back their verdict- in favor of Church Mutual and against us. Needless to say, I've had the rug pulled out from under me. Last Sunday I was so sure the verdict would be in our favor and we'd be awarded enough money to completely build our church all at one time.

2. How did I feel when I heard that we'd lost our case? Well, when I receive bad news I have a characteristic way of dealing with it. Something within me anesthetizes me so that I don't feel anything. I feel numb. Later the anesthesia wears off and I begin to feel the pain. This usually happens at about 3 in the morning. I wake up in the darkness and I hurt and I cry out silently to God who is present but hiding in the darkness. How bad did I feel when the pain-killer wore off? I felt bad. I felt real bad. I felt scared. I felt depressed. I felt hope ebbing. How quickly our hopes are dashed.

3. Life is like a ocean. One moment we're floating along on calm seas or at the crest of a wave and the sun is shining, cool breezes are blowing. The next moment we're rushing down into the darkness of an abyss with the cold waves crashing above us and our ship seems like its going to break up or be swallowed up. Maybe it's the result of what the doctor tells us. Maybe it's because our marriage is falling apart. Maybe it's because our children are beyond our command.

4. The first followers of Jesus knew all about these roller coaster experiences. Think of how they must have felt on that first Palm Sunday. Jesus came riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. It was warm and sunny. You could see the lilies blooming and smell the daffodils. The robins chirped merrily. And the crowds were smiling, laughing; both old and young. They cut palms and placed them and their coats before him on the ground. They shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David." Peter looked at Andrew with a broad smile and says, "It looks like the verdict is going to be in favor of Jesus."

They'd spent nearly three years with Jesus. He'd preached the Gospel, healed the sick, raised the dead and ate and drank with sinners. Throughout the Gospels, though, you sense that Jesus is on trial. The question keeps coming up, "Who is this Jesus?" Witnesses take the stand. First, John the

Baptist, then the man born blind, and the woman who was healed with the issue of blood. There's blind Bartimaeus who now sees and testifies to what Jesus has done for him. There's a man who once was a crippled beggar. There's a woman from whom Jesus had cast out seven demons. There's Lazarus who was dead and buried and now living, breathing, laughing - no longer afraid of death and dying.

One after another they take the witness stand and testify on behalf of Jesus. They're cross examined by the scribes and pharisees but their story doesn't change. And on Palm Sunday it looks as though the jury is believing their testimony. The disciples sense that the verdict is going to be in their favor. Jesus will be acknowledged to be the Messiah. Jesus will usher in the Kingdom and establish God's rule on earth, painlessly, quickly. That night - the night of the first Palm Sunday - the disciples must have slept peacefully, with great contentment - they were so sure of what the final verdict would be.

Days later, however, after deliberating the jury brought back the verdict of guilty. Jesus was found guilty and sentenced to death by crucifixion. He was beaten with clubs. He was insulted. He suffered the indignity of mocking. The disciples then remembered the words of the prophet Isaiah, "He gave his back to the smiters, and his cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: he hid not his face from shame and spitting."

5. Now, when things like this happen we long to know what it all means. When the doctor says "cancer" it's not enough. We want to know what that means... what it will mean. When you go through the divorce, you're not content with knowing merely what happened and the events that led up to the event. You want to know what it all means and what it will mean for you in the future.

The Bible tells us not only what happened to Jesus, but also what those events meant. There's a big difference. When, for example, the Fourth Gospel describes the first Palm Sunday event, the author adds these words, "At the time his disciples did not understand this, but after Jesus had been glorified they remembered that this had been written about him, and that this had happened to him." In other words, they realized that behind the recorded events of that day, something else was going on -- something that was to change forever the course of human history, something that the Spirit of the living God was working out in a hidden way.

The Gospel writers tell us that Jesus was tried, found guilty, and crucified. That's what happened. But what does it mean. The Apostle Paul tells us what it means:

Christ Jesus... who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

We need the facts to let us know what happened both 2000 years ago and last week. But we need the reflections of the church to help us understand the meaning hidden in those event.

6. What, then is the meaning of last week's events? We lost the lawsuit. That's what happened last Tuesday. But what does it mean? I got this note last week which helped me understand what it means. The note said:

I know we lost the case, I feel sad about it, too! But, you know, we've gained something more important from this. I truly believe we will look back 8-10 yrs. from now and be glad this happened. We don't know why now, but God will show us his plan soon enough. It's just frustrating having to wait!

It came to me that this new church is going to mean alot more to us this way. We've not only been humbled, but as we look at each brick it will say something to us we probably wouldn't have heard before. It'll say, "I cost you more in hard work, but you laid me anyway. I'm standing

here because of your faith. We all stand here, side by side, one brick holding up the other, secure in God's foundation - because all of you set such a good example."

Another person said this to me. "Now, we'll have to learn what it means to live by faith. Our church has always had it so easy. We're the oldest church in town. We used to be the most prestigious church in town with our steeple that could be seen for miles around. But now we've been humbled. We've lost our church. We've lost the law-suit. Things aren't going to be easy. Maybe we'll lose some people before it's all over. But we're going to be a stronger church. We're going to be a more faithful church. The new church is going to mean so much more."

7. What has this experience taught me? It's taught me something about the nature of faith, of Christian faith. Faith is always risky. The law suit was a risky thing. We weren't guaranteed to win. We took a step of faith. We prayed about it. Since before Advent some of us, not many, maybe 10 or 15 each week, met on Sunday evening to pray about the law-suit and the rebuilding process. We didn't simply pray to win... we prayed for God's will to be done. Real Christian faith is a gamble. It's a risk. Just like our law-suit was.

8. The events of this last week have also made me appreciate more what we believe, as Christians about God... what, in fact, St Paul says in our Epistle Lesson. Paul speaks of God humbling himself in order to make himself known to us. God himself enters into the world, so often full of darkness and tragedy. God himself risked placing himself on trial and losing.

The God we believe in as Christians is not a God who stands far off from his world, aloof and distant from its problems. In Christ, we're dealing with a God who has entered into our human situation, who became a human being

and lived among us as one of us - who knows at first hand what it's like to be frail, mortal and human, to lose, to suffer and to die. God shares the darkest moments of his people.

O may this bounteous God
Through all our life be near us,
With ever joyful hearts
And blessed peace to cheer us;
And keep us in His grace,
And guide us when perplexed,
And free us from all ills
In this world and the next.

Let us pray: Almighty and everliving God, in your tender love for the human race you sent your Son our Savior Jesus Christ to take upon him our nature, and to suffer death upon the cross, giving us the example of his great humility: Mercifully grant that we may walk in the way of his suffering, and also share in his resurrection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.