

Delayed Understanding

A sermon preached at Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Palm Sunday, March 23, 1997. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; John 12:12-16.

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

What happened on that Spring day long ago when Jesus came to the Passover feast in Jerusalem? Each of the four Gospels gives us the facts. Jesus deliberately arranged what we call today a demonstration. At last he was coming out into the open as the Deliverer of his people. They were wildly excited. Their mood was infectious. Soon the streets were crammed with pilgrims, jostling, shouting, and waving palm branches. If TV news cameras had been available then the whole country would've watched the scene that night. The newspaper headlines would be "Galilean Rabbi provokes demonstration in Jerusalem!" "Thousands acclaim new pretender to the throne of David!" "Anxiety among Temple authorities!" "Pilate alerts his troops!"

The accounts in the gospels are perfectly understandable. But why should millions be hearing them read today in almost every corner of the world? Why should we be interested in what happened in Jerusalem on that particular day? To begin to understand we have to ask another question -- not: What happened that day? but What was really going on? There's a vast difference. The media can tell us, for instance, what happened in Albania last week, but, if you're like me, you want to know what's really going on in that area of Eastern Europe. I read an interview with Father Luke Veronis whose father is the well known priest at the Greek Orthodox church in Lancaster. His son, Luke, is also a priest who felt God's call to go as a missionary to

Albania with the Orthodox church there. In the interview he said he planned to stay in Albania. "How can I tell these people how much God loves them and then run away at the slightest sign of danger?" The newscasts tell us the facts of what's happening in Albania. Father Veronis was telling us what's really going on there; a struggle between the powers of darkness and the gospel.

Most of us can think of moments in our own life when what happened could be quickly described but what was really going on changed the course of our life. For example, this past week a friend of Kay shared with her that when she was a senior in high school there was only one person she wanted to go to the prom with. But he didn't ask her soon enough. She ended up being asked by someone she really didn't want to go with. She said yes to him. Shortly after that, the guy she really wanted to go with asked her. She wanted to break the date with the first guy. But her mother told her that wouldn't be right. So she went to the prom with a guy she really didn't like. That's what happened. But what was really going on? What was really going on is that they hit it off pretty well that night. In fact, they ended up eventually getting married. What happened could be quickly described but what was really going on changed the course of her life.

That sometimes happens in our relationship to God. You may have gone to church on Sunday morning, perhaps somewhat unwillingly, or at least reluctantly. But something was going on beyond the mere fact that you were there: a sentence in the

sermon, or a phrase of music, or a person you met opened a new chapter in your life that called you into the life of God.

When the Fourth Gospel has given us the facts about the tumultuous reception of Jesus on the first Palm Sunday the author adds these illuminating 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 at a later time that behind the Palm Sunday demonstration that day, something else was going on -- something that was to change forever the course of human history.

What that was is revealed to us in a letter Paul wrote to the Philippian church. [↙] Paul had heard rumors that the little band of Christians in Philippi were weakened by quarrels. So he comes right to the point: "Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves." Paul knew that humility alone could solve the petty squabbles that threatened the church.

But what makes a man or woman truly humble? Paul tells us. He holds before our eyes the one Figure in all history from whom we can learn the secret of true humility, the one who reveals that at the heart of this mysterious universe is nothing other than the humility of God Almighty. Paul tells us what was really happening on when Jesus wound his way through the narrow streets of Jerusalem - an event which led eventually to his death on the cross and the triumph of Easter morning.

Who is this Jesus -- and what was going on? Paul writes: "he was in the form of God." This is the son of God, the perfect reflection of the Father. And instead of rejoicing in this divine equality, "he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave." The One they saw that morning riding into Jerusalem to a royal reception was not, as some thought, ready to raise the banner of armed revolt against the Romans. (Nor) was he some Son of God pretending to be human. He was God's Son, God's other self, voluntarily stripped of all authority and almightiness, going right down to the lowest rank in service to others, "taking the form of a slave." "He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death -- death on a cross." And on the cross, with all its physical and emotional and spiritual pain, he entered that pit where God himself seems totally absent and the universe has no meaning. That was where his humility took him. That was where he was headed when the cheering stopped on that first Palm Sunday.

But that's not all that was happening. The Good News breaks in as this poem suddenly surges up from the depths and reveals the truth of what was really going on. "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."

The great arc of salvation was complete--from God in the eternal glory, down to abject humility to serve and save us all,

then up from that hell to the "right hand of God." And we are invited to be swept up with him on this arc of salvation. To believe in him, to accept him as Lord, is to be delivered from the fears that we live in a world without hope or meaning. To believe in him is also to be shown that humility and service to others are not options for a Christian, but a necessary grateful response to a love that beats in the heart of God.

Let us pray: God of all, you gave your only-begotten son to take the form of a servant, and to be obedient even to death on a cross. Give us the same mind that was in Christ Jesus, that, sharing in his humility, we may come to be with him in his glory, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.