

Palm Sunday Demonstration

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Palm Sunday, March 27, 1988. 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.

Thursday I opened the windows for the first time this year and put down the screens. The warm breeze carried the fragrance of pine needles and cow manure. I heard birds singing and the sound of the breeze in the bare limbs of trees. It got so warm the attic fan came on. I turned back the thermostat. Thursday night it was too warm for my flannel pajamas and we took the quilt off. I rejoiced! Spring is here!

But my rejoicing was short-lived. Friday evening we put the storm windows back down. It rained all night and the wind beat against our house. Saturday Temple lost. Villanova lost. The Phillies lost an

~~exhibition game.~~ In the late afternoon we turned up the thermostat and last night I dug out my flannel pajamas. My celebration of Spring was a little premature. But I still believe Spring *is* coming. Praise the Lord! Spring is coming!

Today is Palm Sunday. Palm Sunday is like last Thursday. It's a teaser. Jesus is proclaimed King. The people cry out, "Hosanna! Save now!" But tomorrow Jesus will curse the fig tree because it hasn't yet produced figs. Tuesday, Judas will conspire with the Scribes and Pharisees to betray Jesus. Thursday, the disciples will forsake Jesus and Peter will deny him. Friday, Jesus will be crucified. Palm Sunday is a premature celebration. But Easter Sunday is coming. Jesus will rise from the dead and every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord.

As Christians, we know that Easter is only a week away. But what we see so clearly was foggy and unclear to those who were with Jesus on that first Palm Sunday. St Mark gives us *no* reason to believe that anybody

but his immediate disciples took notice of that first Palm Sunday demonstration. Jerusalem was usually a town of about 50,000 people. During Passover, however, thousands of pilgrims streamed into Jerusalem. Josephus, the ancient Jewish historian, is probably exaggerating but he says that as many as 3 million pilgrims came to Jerusalem yearly for the Passover celebrations. It was the tradition for these pilgrims to celebrate the coming of Spring and to sing Psalms of praise as they approached Jerusalem. Psalm 118, parts of which were spoken by the disciples of Jesus on that first Palm Sunday, would have been sung by thousands of pilgrims without any reference at all to Jesus. Would we have recognised Jesus in that crowd and hub-bub?

Several years after the event a man named Mark wrote about it. Mark ~~was a Christian. He believed that Jesus of Nazareth was the divine Son of~~ God. He believed that the death of Jesus on the cross was a ransom paid for sins. He believed that Jesus rose from the dead and would come again from heaven in power and great glory to establish his Kingdom and judge the world. Mark saw with the eyes of faith what so many had not been able to see on that first Palm Sunday. He saw in Jesus a divine Being. He had supernatural knowledge of the whereabouts of the colt. He exercised a strange power over it's owners so that they immediately released it to the disciples. He had supernatural power to ride an untamed colt without being bucked off. He saw in Jesus one who knew he'd be rejected and spit upon and put to death. He saw in Jesus the Lord who was in control of everything; who deliberately entered Jerusalem as a king and chose for his throne the cross.

This is the kind of King Jesus chose to be. Was he mistaken? Dom Helder Camera, Archbishop of Recife and Olinda in Brazil, is an active

campaigner for social reform. The government of Brazil, at one time, banned his books. Journalists are forbidden to mention his name. Some of those whose cause he champions, the poor and the oppressed of Brazil, want to turn to violence. They ask him to give one example of a country that has managed to liberate itself *without* violence. His reply: "Give me one example of a country that has managed to liberate itself *with* violence."

This touches the heart of our own faith. Was Jesus mistaken about his messiahship? "What kingdom has ever been established without violence?" we ask. And Jesus answers, "What kingdom has ever lasted that has established itself by violence?" Christ chose a different path to establish his kingdom. "Christ humbled himself and became obedient unto death, ~~even death on a cross.~~" ~~Was he mistaken? Can this be the way of success?~~ Should this be the kind of mind-set that we also should have?

I don't know when Spring will finally get here. Maybe this week. Maybe next month. I don't know. But I believe Spring is coming. And we don't know when Christ's kingdom will come in power. Maybe this week. Maybe next month. Maybe in a thousand years. But we believe his kingdom is coming. We bet our life on it as Christians. So we cry out to Jesus, "Hosanna! Save us, now! Save our loved ones from an early death. Save our children from drugs and alcohol and AIDS. Save our nation from racism and materialism and militarism. Save our church from complacency!"

And every once in a while we see hints of his coming kingdom. We see it in people like Mother Theresa, but also in these bags representing your sacrificial giving to others in the name of Jesus. We see it in people like Jim Syms who recently shared with the young adult class how Christ has really turned him around and enabled him to recognise and respond to Jesus

Christ as Lord. And we see hints of the promised kingdom of Christ in events like the cease fire agreement between the Contras and the Sandinistas. Promises of Spring! Promises of salvation! The Promise of Christ's coming Kingdom.

The religious crowds streaming into Jerusalem for the Passover celebration, for the most part, didn't recognise him as King. But whatever blinds us to his coming is a serious matter because I believe that recognizing and responding to Jesus as Lord, is the whole secret of life. To have him as our Lord means life and hope and peace for ourselves and for this war torn crazy world. To miss him is to miss everything.

In the last few years I've been trying to teach my boys to play chess. They're slowly learning the game but it's still hard for them to understand ~~the point of the game. They try to play chess like checkers. They think ---~~ the winner should be the one who has the most pieces. So they wonder how they've lost when they still have so many of their pieces on the board. And I have to keep telling them, "the important piece is the king." The whole game centers on the king. You can grab all the pawns, bishops, knights and rooks on the board but if you lose your king, you've lost everything. And you can protect all your pieces and be unwilling to sacrifice any of them, but you'll still lose if you lose the king.

What the king is to chess, Jesus is to life. It doesn't make any difference how many pieces you have at the end of the game of life if you don't have the king. You can gain the whole world and lose your soul. In the end the only thing that matters is to recognize and respond to Christ as your King and to know that in life and in death you belong to him.

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. Amen.