

Palm Sunday Year C: 13 / 14 April 2019

St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY

The Reverend Gary Cyr

“Today ushers in Holy Week where we will come face-to-face with our own trails, be convicted of our own sinfulness at the cross, all the while knowing that God will transform it all in the resurrection from which we are offered new life in Christ.”

Isaiah 50: 4-9a

Psalm 31

Philippians 2: 5-11

Luke 22: 14-46

In a quote attested to Thomas Merton, he writes “[that] God speaks to us in three places: in scripture, in our deepest selves, and in the voice of the stranger.” There were many strangers in the crowd that fateful day when Jesus rode into Jerusalem seated upon a colt. Individuals who certainly heard of Jesus’ “miracles” or “signs.” This was Jerusalem after all and news in such a city was sure to travel fast, though it is the same city that did not welcome Jesus warmly in the past. Matter-of-fact, many in the city, especially in the religious community, were downright hostile whenever he made an appearance. They may have heard of his work in Cana where he turned water into wine, or heard of his feeding a multitude in the plains of Galilee. He is reputed to have given sight to the blind, mobility to the lame and even credited with raising the dead, bringing them to life again. It is rumored that he even spoke with those Samaritans; having the audacity to stay in their community for several days. Thus, he is the man-of-the-hour in their eyes and they celebrate his arrival in festive form. They are jubilant as the prospect of their anticipated liberator enters their midst.

By all appearances, it seems Jesus is basking in their adulation; he is awash in their shouts of joy. It is by all measures a triumphant entrance; one that belies the events yet to unfold. What starts as a joyful day ends with Jesus feeling dismay. By evening he is fraught with despair, anticipating the powers that seek to silence his message have conspired against

him. After all, the political establishment killed his cousin John the Baptizer, and now the religious establishment seeks to do likewise to him. He is seemingly alone in his despair as even those closest to him have lost the will to stay by his side. Maybe they were tired from all the festivities of the day and the events that occurred during their evening meal. Whatever the cause, they faltered when the hour of reckoning was upon Jesus.

There is a part of me that empathizes with Jesus. I personally know that feeling of having succeeded at a task only to be left with an incomprehensible sadness. And maybe some of you are also familiar with this phenomenon. You set a goal and work to achieve its outcome. You face dissenters and naysayers and overcome objections and assuage concerns. Who hasn't laid out a course, set a goal, plotted a way forward and not faced opposition. It's human nature. Not everyone is or will be onboard, but you stay the course emerging with the achievement of meeting the desired outcome. However, instead of relishing your success, you feel dismay, like something is missing. The achievement is anti-climactic. Why? You did all the right things, followed through on all the commitments, met all the demands, answered all the questions. You should be feeling elated, but you don't. You don't because there is still much work to do, i.e. not everyone gets what you're trying to do.

I imagine Jesus feeling this very sensation of things being anti-climactic as he rode into Jerusalem. The people saw the signs but they don't fully comprehend their significance. They expect Jesus to free them from the tyranny of Rome and establish a new kingship which will usher in an age of peace. Jesus has, all along, been trying to tell them that what they desire is earthly comfort and not living in faith, trusting in God. They fail, as do many of his closest disciples, to comprehend that significance of Jesus' message – it isn't about human standards, but heavenly desire. Jesus has embodied in his life, his actions, his words the truth of God's desire for justice and peace centered in thanksgiving and gratitude. In other words, centered in the Eucharist. But many of the strangers that fateful day and several of those more familiar with Jesus only see what they want to see. Hear what they want to hear. And it isn't all their fault, really. They have what, in academic circles, is called a Sunday School Theology.

All of us, in one form or another, have had some childhood religious instruction. For some it was church school. For others catechism class. And for others bible camp. The people

gathered that day in Jerusalem had been given instruction into their faith, their stories, their rituals and customs throughout their upbringing. But many don't go beyond that understanding; they don't delve deeper into their faith. As St Paul writes, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways" (1 Cor. 13.11). Many good people of faith remain grounded in what Paul deems "childish ways" of seeing and understanding Jesus. I recently encountered this very concept in an overheard conversation as I waited in my doctor's office for some lab work to be done.

The middle-aged couple didn't see me walk in by which they didn't notice my clerical collar. I sat back to them and a few rows away. There were four of us in the waiting room. The couple spoke, I imagine, about one of their adult children and their troubles blaming those unpleasantries that were befalling them on their lack of "true" faith. If only they would accept Jesus as their lord and savior things would be better, to which the fourth person in the room said amen. They spoke of the need for their child to get rid of that creep altar in their home with its false god. It did not take much imagination on my part to realize they were talking about a prayer altar with a Buddha statue upon it. Siddhartha Gautama never spoke of himself as being a god nor sought such designation. He was called Buddha, which simply means enlightened one, one who has gained wisdom. Rather than eschew other spiritual traditions due to one's being ill-informed, especially about one's own religious tradition, it is better to seek out a teacher who will better guide you in understanding. For me, Jesus is my principle teacher who advocates for a more critical approach to my faith than what was given me in my formative youth. On that day in the doctor's office, I was thankful for the teachers I have had who have walked with me in understanding other faiths from which I learned more about my own tradition. To simply say Jesus will make all things right again is simplistic and reductionist. To embrace Jesus' message is to risk transformation into discipleship which thus entails a new way of living – of living eucharistically, that is with thanksgiving and gratitude.

If they truly understood what prayer can be, the couple in the doctor's office that day would know that prayer is not so much about getting something as it is about becoming someone – someone in relationship with God. Jesus prayed at the end of the day for

deliverance from the trial he was about to endure knowing that he wasn't asking to get something. Rather, he prayed in order to find the strength to face the trials knowing that God is present even in the midst of our deepest despair. Prayer is about humbling ourselves before God seeking to be transformed into disciples who stay the course seeking justice and peace.

Palm Sunday simply reminds me of this: that following Jesus is not always going to be joyful or celebratory; there are trials and tribulations when one lives in a Christ-like way that is counter-cultural in human expectations. Today ushers in Holy Week where we will come face-to-face with our own trials, be convicted of our own sinfulness at the cross, all the while knowing that God will transform it all in the resurrection from which we are offered new life in Christ.

"Hosanna, blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" becomes the anguished prayer "Father, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done." That is the lesson of this day, and may it be our prayer as we go forth in our Lenten journey into Holy Week and Christ's passion.