

Palm Sunday (A)  
*Matt. 21.1-11/ Isaiah 50.4-9/ Philippians 2.5-11/ Matt. 27.11-54*  
St. Paul's Church, Halifax  
16 March 2008

Being There

~Paul H. Friesen~

You probably noticed there were quite a few questions in the first part of St. Matthew's Passion Gospel. So maybe we should begin with a few of our own.

Why are we at worship today? There are a whole lot of worthwhile things we could be doing. I don't mean getting our Income Tax ready to mail early, or finally finding the time to clean the toilet, or taking the time to shovel snow off cement.

I'm thinking of other questions. Why aren't we all somewhere else spending 'quality time' with family or good friends? Why aren't we letting ourselves relax after a hard week, and settle into a comfortable chair with the heat turned up a bit, a good book in our hand, perhaps even a spiritual book. Or better yet, why aren't we at home praying to God and thinking about each other?

Why are we gathered together in one place at the same time to worship God—and with people with whom we might (in that terrible phrase) 'not have much in common'?

If you're like me you have mixed motives, and conscious and unconscious reasons, and both noble and not-so-noble intentions for (in another terrible phrase) 'showing up'.

But here's what really matters. We are here. Somehow we have heard the call of our heavenly Father to join us at the family gathering we are always called to as members of the Christian family. And its in the DNA of the church, we could say, to gather together if at all possible.

And today is a special family celebration, which happens only once a year.

Today is Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week, the last week of Jesus' life. This morning we have re-enacted the first 'day of the palms', two thousand years ago, the day recalled in all four of our Gospels, a day never to be forgotten by the Christian community. It was the very first 'March for Jesus'—as Palm Sunday processions, like our own, might also be called.

Jesus entry into Jerusalem has been re-enacted for centuries. As early as the fourth century throngs of Christian pilgrims ascended the Mount of Olives to sing and hear Scripture lessons, and then returned to the city with palm and olive branches singing 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'

Three hundred years later Palm Sunday had been recognized as a regular celebration as far away as western Europe. By the ninth century processions like our own, were becoming a part of the worship of the Western world. At the same time Theodulf of Orleans, a refugee at the court of Charlemagne, wrote new music still being sung by us today.

'All Glory, laud, and honour/To thee, Redeemer, King,'<sup>1</sup> we have sung and walked this morning also. And to this we have added new Hosannas. And around the world this morning, in many languages and with many kinds of music our fellow Christian families are offering their own Hosannas.

It says in another Gospel that if we were silent the stones we have walked on would cry out in our place, because God's world and everything in it cannot help but echo the praise of Jesus, the king.

To do this, on this day, it really matters that we are here, no matter how complicated or contradictory our reasons for 'showing up' are. God welcomes our participation in this family day, and delights in our praises.

It is something we couldn't do if we were somewhere else doing something else, no matter how worthwhile we thought that thing was. And it matters that we bring these family praises with us to someone who can't be here today—perhaps a short visit and the gift of a palm leaf might revive in their mind Palm Sundays on which they have worshipped in this place with their fellows.

But this is not only the Sunday of Palms and Praises, from young and old alike. It is also the Sunday of the Passion of Jesus Christ—the day on which we see all of Holy Week. This is the day we have seen and heard each other betray Christ in the Gospel story, not long after we have praised Christ as the Messiah, the King.

It is another reason we had to be here today, especially. Have you noticed a problem in the papers this week? There was a whole lot about what is wrong with the world, but almost nothing about folks claiming responsibility for what has gone wrong? Have you noticed it's the same every day, every week, all year long in the papers?

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<sup>1</sup> L.W. Cowie and J.S. Gummer, *The Christian Calendar* (Springfield, Massachusetts: G&C Merriam, 1974), p.69. Thomas Talley argues that the Jerusalem rites might have been strongly influenced by the rites brought by fourth-century pilgrims from all over the Christian world. See *The Origins of the Liturgical Year* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1991), p.176-183.

An Anglican priest I know told me a few months ago that she was getting flak from some folks in her congregation for letting the word 'sin' slip into some of her sermons. She would be considered 'mainline' or 'liberal' not 'evangelical', but she told us she did what she had to do. She preached a whole sermon on sin.

Why on earth bother with what Anglicans call a weekly 'general confession' if we were generally okay?

Well she wondered aloud afterwards if younger people had more trouble with the idea than older people. But I wonder if that's not really the trouble today. Isn't the trouble today the trouble that we all have in accepting responsibility ourselves for a sin 'over there'.

It is a bold move for each of us, however young or old, or pious or sinful, to take on responsibility for Christ's death. But it is the right move.

And that is why we have also taken on shouting out, 'Let him be crucified!' It's a shocking thing to do. But unless we accepted responsibility in person, and in the general confession, and shouted it aloud on the Sunday of the Palms and Passion, there wouldn't be a church still alive today. How can we accept the love of Christ, how can we realize its cost, its depth, without considering the passion of Christ, and our implication in it?

Did you notice how crowded the Gospel was this morning? Of course there is Pilate, a Roman puppet king, saying a fair bit as he tries to weasel his way out of the trial, and there is Jesus (the preacher, and healer, the rabbi and prophet called Messiah and King and son of God) who, amazingly, says very little. And the few words Jesus says turns responsibility back on those who question him. For the questions are all excuses. They betray a guilty conscience.

But around that drama are the others—Barabbas, a 'freedom fighter' for his fellows, a 'terrorist' to the Roman occupying force.

There are the chief priests and the elders, that is the religious leaders, who were calling for Christ's death, because he undermined their authority and ate and drank with sinners, and attracted the Romans' hostile attention.

There are the soldiers, who mock and torture Jesus, not caring which convicted criminal is thrown their way, but taking advantage of any rumour about him to humiliate him and do violence.

There is Simon from the town of Cyrene, who doesn't know what is going on, but is conscripted, forced against his will, to carry Christ's cross. He doesn't get to say anything.

There are the two bandits, crucified with him, who had nothing to lose and so taunted Jesus with everyone else, aiming ridicule at him to relieve some of the miserable attention given to all who were publicly crucified.

There are those called 'the bystanders' –they seem morbidly curious—some hear Jesus' forsaken cry to his God as his death cry and offer him a narcotic. Others say—'No, no—let's see if something happens—a band of angels, some miracle.

There are the centurion and a few of his soldiers who hear Christ's cry and feel the earthquake, and graves opened. In their terror, their absolute terror they can only say 'Truly this man was God's Son!'

And last of all, above all, there is the crowd. There is the crowd, a good chunk of which must have welcomed Christ at his entry into the city, but now shouting, 'Crucify him!' 'Crucify him!'

It's a very crowded Gospel. Everyone is there. We are there at the trial and the cross of Christ. We are responsible.

You know, we didn't come here today to feel our yearly guilt, to assess the depth of our faith by the amount of misery we can trump up. We came here today, as Christ's family, to accept responsibility. We came to accept responsibility so we could receive forgiveness and live different lives this year of our Lord.

We came to accept responsibility—not 'our share' because that phrase has an excuse written into it. We came to accept, all of us together our personal and corporate responsibility for the death of Christ.

But we came not to accept responsibility for something that happened 2000 years ago and not since. Because we know that we are implicated in the sin of the world.

When folks die half way around the world we need to think about our responsibility too. When those made in God's image die in wars, and famines, and in factories we can't say it's someone else's fault. It's our fault.

And if it is our fault, forgiveness is ours for the asking, and a change of life required of us.

This week, we know (intellectually) that there can be no Easter Sunday without a Maundy Thursday, and a good Friday, and a Holy Saturday. This week we have a chance to ask forgiveness. But it is far better to set aside good things apart, and gather together for the best. It is far better, regardless of mixed motives, or complicated states of mind to bring our

bodies here. Because it is with these that we learn to worship, and our minds are spiritually formed.

We have the opportunity, together, to walk with the disciples, to have Jesus wash our feet on Thursday and celebrate the new commandment to love one another. We have the opportunity, to stand at the cross on Friday and keep company with Jesus, and here our fellows meditate on Christ's words on the cross. We have the opportunity on Holy Saturday to keep the vigil at Christ's tomb, and await the joys of the resurrection with the great story of God's salvation in our ears and in our hearts, and to feel it in our bodies.

And we have a chance this week to take a palm, a leaflet, a story, our experience of worship—in person, with our bodies, to those who really can't be here. Because if we go, we will take Christ with us to them.

Thanks be to God for this chance to sing Christ's praise.