

HARMONY – MUTUAL LOVE – PEACE

Palm Sunday – April 17, 2011

Harmony. Mutual love. Peace. Where in that understanding of the Divine, can we possibly come to the conclusion that God needed-or-wanted Jesus to die a violent death?

Our Prayer Book gives a double title to our worship today. A double title that brings together the competing sway of emotions that tug at our hearts and our souls. *The Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday.* We gathered earlier as a representation of the crowd of people who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem. Waving palm branches and singing hosannas. What a feeling that must have been for those first followers of Jesus. After the months and years of teaching and traveling throughout the Galilee and in Judea, they had at last arrived in Jerusalem. The words of the Psalm would have certainly been in their hearts and on their lips:

*I was glad when they said to me,
'Let us go to the house of the Lord!'
Our feet are standing
within your gates, O Jerusalem. ¹*

And as Jesus and his disciples arrived, it must have seemed like everyone was glad to see Jesus. Happy to see and to hear the itinerant preacher and teacher and healer about whom everyone had heard. If this were only Palm Sunday the readings and the music and the entire tone of the service would all be as happy and as cheerful and as exuberant as that opening scene. But today is not only Palm Sunday. It is also the Sunday of the Passion.

The Sunday of the Passion.

The Sunday when we also recall the betrayal, the arrest, the trial, the torture, the crucifixion, and finally, mercifully, the death of Jesus. The Passion narrative leads us through Jesus being progressively and systematically stripped of everything: his ministry, his disciples, his freedom, his dignity, his closeness to God, his life.

From the betrayal of Judas and the complicity of the religious authorities in charge of the Temple, to the fleeing of the disciples and most of his friends. The arrest that could only take place at night, because the powers-that-be knew that they could not take Jesus into custody in broad daylight.

Two separate trials – one before a religious court, and another before the Romans. Stripped of his clothes, mocked, whipped, tortured, and nailed to a cross. Yet even when naked and alone on the cross, Jesus did not lose his trust in God. He cried out *My God, My God Why have you forsaken me?* in his abandonment precisely because of his trust.

But stripped at the last, of even his closeness to God, he died. Despite the spiritual and emotional discomfort this story causes us, for today, we have to leave it right here. Jesus is dead.

For today – for the rest of Holy Week, we need to live within this moment of betrayal and death. Because it is only by remaining

conscious of the Passion that we have a chance to stop abusing the image of God revealed in the dignity of every human being.

That same dignity that was taken on by Christ, as we heard in the reading from Paul's letter to the early followers of Jesus at Philippi. In that letter we hear how God in Christ showed us true humility by taking human nature, and then by walking the way of the cross. The passion of Jesus helps us to see how the identity of each person is a reflection of the image of God.

So that we might be able to see past our own self-interest. Self-interest which leads inevitably to competition – and from competition to violence.²

Christian people have struggled for centuries – and many still struggle today – with the question: Why did Jesus die on the cross? Did Jesus *have to* die in order of us “to be saved”? Did God want – or need – Jesus to die? Our parish has studied and prayed, and discussed and disagreed with each other on this matter. We've even had the good grace to laugh with and at each other. A conclusion has become clear, at least for me.

A conclusion that within the Divine Life of the Trinity, there is no self-interest. There is no competition. And there is no tendency towards violence.

Within the concept of God that we understand as Father, Son, & Holy Spirit, there is no self-interest. There is no completion. And there is no tendency towards violence.

In fact it is all completely and utterly quite the opposite. Instead of competition – there is perfect, eternal, harmony. Rather than self-interest – there is perfect, eternal, mutual love. In the place of a tendency towards violence – there is perfect, eternal, peace.

Harmony. Mutual love. Peace.

Within that understanding of the Divine, I cannot get my heart or my mind or my soul around the idea that God needed-or-wanted Jesus to die a violent death. It is just not true. God neither needed or wanted Jesus to die.

Jesus died because he challenged and confronted the powers and principalities of his age. Those powers and principalities are the same in every age. They are no different today, than they were in the time of Jesus. Powers and principalities are ruled and governed precisely by their own self interest – which leads inevitably towards competition, which will always, always, always, always end in violence. That is why Jesus died.

And if Jesus became incarnate in our age and time – we would kill him again.

And so, here we are. For us, today, Jesus is dead. We can never go back and be who we once were. We are not yet in the place where we can become something new. All we can do right now, is to watch and pray.

¹ Psalm 122

² Michael Battle. *Feasting on the Word, Preaching from the Revised Common Lectionary*. Year B, Volume 2. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors. Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, page 182