

Sunday of the Passion, Year A, 2008
(Palm Sunday, the 6th Sunday of Lent)
The Rev. Ronald N. Johnson

Today is the Sunday of the Passion, traditionally called Palm Sunday. It is the Sunday of two liturgies, two Gospels, two stories: one is the story of triumph; the other the story of death. We begin with the joy of our Lord's triumphal entrance into the Holy City of Jerusalem. Matthew tells us that Jesus entered the city seated on a donkey and her colt. This was significant. It tied our Lord's entry into the city with the ancient prophecy of Zechariah, who suggested that the Messiah would enter the city in this way. It was all that the people needed, and city population erupted into a near frenzy. "Hosanna!" they shouted, as they lay their cloaks and palm branches on the street before Jesus. "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

Less than a week later, the crowds were still in a frenzy, and the focus of the frenzy was still Jesus. But what a change, what a difference a few days made. The crowd no longer cried, "Hosanna!" Rather, they shouted, "Crucify him! Crucify him."

This shift from triumph to tragedy, from admiration to hatred is the story of Palm Sunday, or the Sunday of the Passion. With it, we begin Holy Week. Holy Week takes us through our Lord's last days, his Last Supper, his betrayal, his trial, his crucifixion and his burial. Holy Week leaves us at the tomb, awaiting the dawning of history's greatest day: Easter, the Sunday of the Resurrection.

Traditionally, on Palm Sunday, preachers try to explain the shift in the attitude of the people towards Jesus. Theories abound, but one is the most likely. What the people expected was not what the people got. They expected a messiah that would free them from Roman domination. God's Messiah came to free them from sin. We gain most from this Sunday when we place ourselves in the crowd, hailing the Messiah until we must ask whether we are in the crowd that is now damning him, because he has defied our expectations. The story must be our story, if we are to go with Jesus through Good Friday to the triumph of Easter Day. Why do we seek Jesus? What are our expectations? We hope we sought him, and continue to seek him, so that we might walk a righteous way into the arms of Almighty God. Christ is the way, the truth. Christ is life. No one comes to the Father, except through Christ. Lent sought to take us on this holy path that leads to the Father, reminding us always that it is a path of self-denial, of sacrifice and commitment.

Our season of Lent is drawing to a close. It is almost over. Lent has challenged us to look inward; to examine ourselves so that we stand revealed to our own eyes as God sees us. If we have been spiritually courageous, we have done this. And now, we stand before the Messiah and the question is, will we follow? Are we prepared, as we enter Holy Week, to come to the Lord, placing at the foot of the Cross those things that separate us from the fullness of his love, letting our Lord wash those things away with his blood, so

that we can follow him into Easter? There is an old Evangelical hymn that asks a question that says it all. *“Are you able,” said the Master, “to be crucified with me?”* Are we able? *Amen.*

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