

The Sunday of the Passion (Palm Sunday), Year A, 2011

Matthew 26:14-27:66

Episcopal Liturgy Anticipated

The Rev. Ronald N. Johnson

Today's liturgy and lessons speak for themselves. They do not need much added in the way of preaching. On this Sunday of our Lord's Passion, there are two gospel readings and the second one is also the longest of the year. On top of this, we have the Liturgy of the Palms, added to the regular Eucharist, so it is usually a good idea for the preacher to keep the preaching short.

I do want to bring one point to your attention. It is significant. In this liturgy, there is a turning, a shifting of themes. There is a sudden and tragic change of heart and direction. The people turn on Jesus – the very people that only a few days before hailed him as a hero and laid palms in his path as he entered the holy city, Jerusalem. The first gospel reading this morning, associated with the Liturgy of the Palms, tells us that the excited and hopeful crowds heralded Jesus as the messiah.

Then, we fast forward from that reading and the liturgy of the palms to the second gospel, our reading from Matthew, chapters twenty-six and twenty-seven. Matthew tells us, in great detail, of the events leading to our Savior's death. There was a betrayal. A trusted friend turned on Jesus and sold him for a few coins. There was a trial and he was sentenced to death, but the Jewish authorities under Roman occupation could not impose capital punishment, so he was handed over to Pilate. And in the story, as Jesus stood before the imperial authority, the same people who acclaimed him rejected him by saying, "Let him be crucified!" We ask why this happened and the answer is simple. When you make up your mind before hand about something, when you expect to get one thing and something different comes along, it's hard to shift expectations. Jesus was the long-awaited messiah but he was not the expected messiah. He was not the messiah the ancient Jews had in mind. They expected a warrior, a general who would form a great army, as King David had, and deliver them from Roman bondage. God's idea was different. God's idea was to deliver them from the bondage of sin. When the crowds didn't get what they wanted, they turned on Jesus. It is that simple.

It was a tragedy then and it remains a tragedy today, although the tragedy is not that Jesus was crucified. If Jesus had not been killed, we would not be a redeemed people. The tragedy is that in spite of all that has gone from that day on, there are still many in this world that do not accept Jesus as Lord, even when the good news of Jesus is presented to them. And the reason is simple. If you are going to pre-define Jesus to meet your expectations and not God's expectations, then the Jesus of history and the Risen Lord of eternity are not going to fit your mold.

With this service today, we begin the most Holy Week of the year. As we approach the event of Good Friday and Easter Day, let us reflect on human nature, on ourselves and

upon our Savior, so that we might more perfectly understand ourselves as a people redeemed through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. *Amen.*