

"A COLT IS NOT A HORSE"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
April 5, 1998

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INTRODUCTION

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"The church I grew up in skipped the events of Holy Week in a rush to hear the lifting cymbal sounds of Easter."

One can understand this desire to skip through Holy Week. Jesus on the cross is cruelty and death. Jesus risen is life and hope. A sanctuary stripped bare for Good Friday is depressing, but a lily bedecked chancel and altar is glorious. Who doesn't want to "skip" through Holy Week? Yet, the adult Philip Yancey has learned that the Bible "slows down rather than speeds up when it gets to Holy Week".

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CHALLENGE FOR HOLY WEEK

So here's the challenge for Holy Week. We have but this one Sunday to cover everything from Jesus entering Jerusalem to the joyous sound of "Hosannas" ringing in the air through to the moment when Jesus was laid in a borrowed tomb. Even the name which more and more is being given to this Sunday reveals a challenge. Today is "Palm / Passion Sunday". It's not "Palm OR Passion Sunday"....not even "Palm AND Passion Sunday". It's "Palm - Passion Sunday"....two different subjects "jammed up" against each other. One Orthodox priest labelled it "a historical and liturgical mess".

In the light then of this "historical and liturgical mess" it's not at all surprising that we tend to focus more on the palms than we do on the passion. Palms suggest triumph and we love winners. That great children's hymn that we sang earlier, "Tell Me the Stories of Jesus" expresses this.

"Tell me the stories of Jesus...I love to hear.
Things I would ask Him to tell me, if He were here.
Into the city I'd follow the children's band,
Waving a branch of the palm tree high in my hand.
One of His heralds, Yes, I would sing loudest hosannas,
"Jesus is King!"

A great hymn, but though the hymn ends there, the story of Jesus in Holy Week does not end with the palms. It ends with the Passion...the pain and suffering of Jesus on the cross and that's not a story of Jesus we "love" to hear. It's too painful.

The irony of the Palm Sunday story is how it ends with a fizzle instead of a sparkle. It begins with elaborate preparations to secure a colt and then Jesus parades into Jerusalem as the crowds hail Him. Soon He enters the Temple in triumph, turns over a few tables as He looks around. His day of victory ends not with a big bang, but with a shrug and therein is a clue for us.

A GOOD HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL MESS

Palm Sunday's meaning can only emerge as we observe what happens to Jesus during the rest of the week. This PALM - PASSION Sunday may be a bit of a historical and theological mess, but it's a good historical and theological mess.

You'll recall that this day begins with Jesus telling His disciples to go into the city of Jerusalem where they will find a colt. In the Bible, please note that a colt is not a horse, but is a young donkey. If Jesus were to have conquered Jerusalem through might, He would certainly have ridden into the city on a fine horse - the animal of war. But Jesus...riding a donkey....the animal of peace. It's a bit like Jesus doing the equivalent of conquering Washington or New York in a Dodge Neon instead of a Sherman Tank!

And here's another issue. To me it's always seemed odd and strange that Jesus would walk 90 miles from the Galilee to Bethany and then secure a donkey for the final two miles to Jerusalem. If you're going to borrow a donkey shouldn't you borrow one which comes with "unlimited mileage"? Jesus' feet weren't tired. Instead, He was planning carefully His entry into Jerusalem by observing every nuance of the Biblical understanding of "WHO" the Messiah was. He was fulfilling Zechariah's prediction,

"...Your King comes to you: triumphant and victorious is
He...humble and riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey"

The triumph of Jesus came not through might, but through things like service and kindness and gentleness. As Jesus nears the city, the crowd then is moved to call out, "Hosanna". They're caught up in this moment and Jesus experiences a tremendous "groundswell" of support as the crowd both leads and follows and I've often felt that at this point Jesus could have done most anything, but He refuses to use His power, His base of support for wrong. Jesus knew who He was and what His mission was and that's important for us to see and recognize.

I've always loved the story of the air passenger whose flight had been cancelled. His patience was wearing thin...almost all gone, and so he shoved his way to the head of the ticket line and angrily demanded a first class ticket on the next available flight. The ticket agent explained that he would be happy to help, but he'd just have to wait in line like everybody else and that was more than the man could take and so he said in a loud voice, "Young man...do you have any idea who I am?" Whereupon the ticket agent picked up his little microphone and said,

"Attention PLEASE! There's a gentleman at the
ticket counter who doesn't know who he is. If
anyone can identify him, come to the counter..."

Jesus knew who He was. This Palm Sunday parade was a prelude to Good Friday and not an end in itself. The cross was the moment, the event to which Jesus had been pointing His life for some time.

And when we stop to really look at the cross of Jesus, we find ourselves moved as the forces which put Jesus to death nearly two thousand years ago are still the evil forces of today. And I've never seen this more succinctly summarized than by the late Henry Sloane Coffin who identified these ills as,

"Religious intolerance (the Pharisees), commercial privilege (the Sadducees), political expediency (Pontius Pilate), pleasure-loving irresponsibility (Herod Antipas), unfaithfulness (Judas), mob spirit (the crowds of Good Friday), militarism (the soldiers) and public apathy (the silence of good people)."

Those our our ills, too, and so we sing this week, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" And most of us are led finally to say, "Yes...we were there....yes, we are there".

The cross reminds us of the reality of sin...of the worst that man can do...kill the very one who loves them the most. Evil's reality is evident in that the only ones who were with Jesus in those final moments when death took Him were the disciple, John, and a few women, including His own mother, Mary and Mary experienced one of the worst pains of a parent....to outlive your own child. Yes, yes...there's so much pain on Good Friday, but we still call it Good Friday and some will ask, "what's so good about it?"

I've received insight recently through learning that our Greek Orthodox friends greet each other with the words, "KALI ANESSTASI". Good resurrection, not on Easter Sunday...but on Good Friday. They anticipate the resurrection as do our friends who will say this Friday, "Yes...it's GOOD FRIDAY....BUT SUNDAY'S COMING...."

THE MIRACLE

And here...dear friends....we edge toward the miracle of miracles that God took the worst the world could do to Jesus and made it a good. If Good Friday reveals the horrendous reality of human sin, then Easter Sunday cancels the power of sin. St. Paul in writing to the Philippians wrote,

That though Jesus was in the "form of God....He emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant....and humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross".

That's Kali Anestasi....Good Resurrection and at Easter that hope is resurrected and renewed in our world.

A mother named Mary sees her Son again. Life beyond the grave still is true. Kali Anestasi. The disciple Peter betrays the Lord, but finds forgiveness. Forgiveness still is possible. Kale Anestasi. The doubter, Thomas, has his doubts shattered and how good to shatter doubts. Kale Anestasi. Mary Magdalene weeps outside a grave, but hears her name called...."Mary". Those who weep shall be comforted. Kale Anestasi. Good Friday, BUT Sunday's coming. Never let us forget that.

This is the second, the time of hope. And those who express hope and have experienced loss and pain are always worth hearing. Such a person is Bill Cosby. Since the murder of his son, Ennis, Bill Cosby knows that ultimate pain of outliving a child and what he has said about good and evil are worth hearing.

"Let me tell you how I feel about Ennis. When people die, you will hear some people say that God called that person. I don't believe that in this case..."

"Yes, there are some people that God will call, but God didn't call Ennis. It wasn't his time. The person who murdered Ennis is somewhere 'out there' riding with the devil".

I think Cosby's right. Never blame God for evil.

You see Palm - Passion Sunday is ecstasy and agony jammed up against each other, which is the ENIGMA of life. We go from high to low and the art in life is to have THE FAITH....even when that faith seems illogical and unreal and out of place.

At this time of year, choirs across our land will be singing the "Sanctus" from John Rutter's Requiem. It's a Palm Sunday anthem and it's the most joyful movement in the Requiem, but immediately following it comes the somber Agnus Dei in which the man sing with a rumbling tone,

"In the midst of life we are in death, we are in death".

Rather chilling, but friend - it's real...but is there anything more?

I read somewhere recently that the motion picture, The Mission, tells of a 19th century slave trader who murdered his own blood brother in a rage and then went on to become a Jesuit serving in South America. In penance for terrible deed of his previous life, he slogs through the mountains with a rope tied around his neck....his albatross, so to speak....but is there anything more or is that all? Yes. Palm Sunday - Passion Sunday....together they are linked to Easter. And St. Paul had more than a hint of it when he wrote those lines, saying it so well.

"God exalted Jesus and gave Him....'the name above every name, so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE SHALL BEND...and EVERY TONGUE CONFESS that Jesus Christ is Lord".

That turns defeat into victory. Death does not have the final word...that last word. God prevails. Kali Anestasi. "It's Friday...but Sunday's coming!"

In the Rutter Requiem when the men are done singing, "We are in death", the women begin to sing in soft ethereal tones,

"I am the RESURRECTION and the LIFE, saith the Lord. He that believeth in Me shall never die, but have everlasting life!"

Again, Kali Anestasi. Back to the film, The Mission...the Jesuit who bears the noose around his neck enters the village where as a slave trader he had wrenched children from their parents to sell them into slavery. A man approaches him....brandishing a knife....and cuts his noose to liberate him. Kale Anestasi.

John Donne captured this visitor when he penned those words,

"I shall rise...from the preternation of death, and never miss the sun....for I shall see the Son of God,

I shall rise from the grave....I shall look up and never wonder when it shall be day, for the angel will tell me that time shall be no more."

CLOSING So, let's not be in a rush to hear the cymbals of Easter and to see the lilies on the altar and in the chancel...to hear again of the stone being rolled away. Let's wrestle and reflect on the paradoxes of this Holy Week into which we now enter...this strange, eternal battle between good and evil....to remember that He rode in on a colt, on a donkey and not on a horse.....Let's remember, too, that Kali Anestasi is not just "greek to us", but is the very essence of faith.

Does the name of Alexander de Seversky mean anything to you? de Seversky, an aviator and engineer and author of a book that was on America's "best seller" list in the early forties, Victory Through Airpower, was also a devout Christian with ties to the Russian Orthodox Church...for he grew up in Russia and as an 21 year old had some 15 German planes to his credit in the Russian Air Force before the Revolution of 1917. He escaped to this country and became a citizen, living here in our own city...Central Park South.

We became friends. I buried his wife, Evelyn, in August of 1967 and for the next seven years, Major deSeversky would call and make an appointment with me to come up here and have prayers offered on the anniversary of his wife's death and then in August of 1974, I buried him. I remember once reading that Major deSeversky was once visiting a fellow flyer in the hospital. The young man had just lost his leg. deSeversky, who had had an artificial leg for some time (although he hid it well), tried to cheer him up. He said,

"The loss of a leg is not so great a calamity. If you get hit on a wooden leg, it doesn't hurt a bit. Try it!"

And with that this young patient raised his walking stick and brought it down hard....very hard...on deSeversky's leg. "You see" responded deSeversky quite cheerfully,

"If you hit an ordinary man like that, he'd be in bed for five days....and maybe even longer!"

With that Major deSeversky left his friend and limped into the corridor, where he collapsed in excruciating pain. The young man had struck deSeversky on his good leg. The pain was real....but he endured it and walked again. Kali Anestasi!

This week we turn to watch the example of Him who took the pain of others and went through suffering and death. God loved this world enough to send His Son of Peace...who experienced our pain...who conquered on a colt and who bids us to follow Him. Kali Anestasi. Good Resurrection. It's Friday, but Sunday's coming.

"In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit"
Amen

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