

"A PALM SUNDAY EPITAPH"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

Across the years I've spent quite a bit of time in cemeteries. It's part of the job, as they say. I think I've been in most of the cemeteries in this metropolitan area. Some of them I like...quiet and peaceful in contrast to the hustle and bustle of the city. Some of them I can do without. They depress me. Even as a teenager in High School upstate, I spent a couple of summer vacations working in the Prospect Hill Cemetery in my hometown, mowing lawns, digging graves and one summer painting the fence around it.

When things got dull (which was often), I would read the tombstones. Many of them are alike in size and shape...upstate...but the important thing about a tombstone is what's inscribed on it. The epitaph tells you something about the person who has died and that something, more often than not, is usually decided by the surviving members of the family...in the way of a tribute.

DEVELOPMENT

For instance, like this one, and we all knew where it was in the cemetery, "Here lies the body of John Blake, who stepped on the gas instead of the brake". Or, this one about a woman about whom we knew nothing except what was on her tombstone. "Here lies the body of Margaret Bent, who kicked up her heels and away she went." She must have been fun!

And I'll never forget this one, even though it has no rhyme. It's in a cloistered area adjacent to the nave of Westminster Abbey in London and not that far from the Poet's Corner and you can imagine how I felt when my eye picked it up on the abbey floor years ago,

"Here lies the body of Philip Clarke, plumber to this collegiate church. He departed this life the 21st of September, 1707, in the 43rd year of his age".

That's a good one. It's nice to have "family" buried in Westminster Abbey. Eat your heart out. They tell me it's a sign of humility to have a floor marker. But one of my real all-time favorites comes from a tombstone in a sleepy little southern town in South Carolina and it's on the grave of a woman named Effie Jean Robinson; and it says:

"I've gone ahead as you can see, so trust my lead and follow me".

That's a fine epitaph for Palm Sunday. I liked it when I first saw it. The only trouble was that someone had scribbled a bit of graffiti on it that said,

"To follow you I'm not content, 'til I know which way you went."

TODAY IS PALM SUNDAY

Today is Palm Sunday and it's a wonderful day for all of us but especially for the children. It's a parade day in the Christian Church, a time to celebrate that little procession that took place outside the city gates of Jerusalem.

What do we know about it and why has it such a hold on our affections? We know it was a spontaneous event. There was no parade marshall who worked long and hard to make the arrangements. No banner committee. No buses bringing in people from surrounding villages. No clean up committee. No reception committee. No drinking. No violence. No police keeping order....an "openness about it".

The mayor wasn't there to greet Jesus, to walk with Him, and to give Him a key to the city. We read that people "spread their garments" on the narrow, winding path. Some "cut branches" and scattered them on the path ahead of Jesus and the donkey on which He sat. They then shouted,

"Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is He who comes
in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"

The Bible record tells us that children were present and if they were then it made for an even more spontaneous and festive happening. It was exciting and people were having a good time and I'm sure that Jesus was enjoying it all... and probably if we had been there we would have noticed a smile on His face.

That is...right up to the gates of the city. You see, this was a parade that for the most part took place outside the walled city of Jerusalem. I've walked that Hosanna rode twice in my lifetime, and perhaps you have, too. That little path comes up over a hill and then winds its way down the slope of the Mount of Olives and down into the Kidron Valley and then up to the gates of Jerusalem. Once Jesus passed through those gates, He was then on His own and pretty much by Himself. The atmosphere changed. The parade and the cheering stopped at the gate of the city and then we read this ominous verse,

"And Jesus entered the Temple of God and drove out all
who sold and bought in the Temple...and He overturned
the tables of the money-changers..."

If there had been a sign posted at the city gate or over one of those great arches, it might have read, "LET ALL PROPHETS ENTER AT THEIR OWN RISK." For those magnificent gates and great arches of Jerusalem represented something of a "tombstone" for all prophets and especially for the One who rode in to the city of Jerusalem that Spring day long ago. I think Jesus sensed that. I think He knew it. And later that day, after "cleansing" the Temple, He went back out to the Mount of Olives and gazed over the Holy City and shed tears as He poured out these words from the innermost depths of His being,

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem...killing the prophets and stoning
those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered
your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her
wings...and you would not."

This parade story has all the ingredients of any "true-to-life" human drama. Here there is excitement and joy. Here there is also truth and tragedy...waiting in the wings. Innocence and yes, also hope. We re-tell this Palm Sunday story each year because it "wraps up" so many ingredients of life and because it also sheds a clear-light on the person of Christ. Jesus. Yes, our Christ. It's a "bitter-sweet" sort of day. It's always been one of my favorite Sundays of the year ever since I was a child. Truth and tragedy come together. Before the sun slips behind those Judean hills that day, the joy of the morning is being lost. Trouble is brewing and one of the greatest tragedies mankind has ever witnessed is getting under way. How to get rid of this man, Jesus, who has come to our city...probing our consciences, challenging our hopes, haunting our dreams, stimulating our spirits. What do we do? How do we handle Him?

To accept Him, or reject Him. It's a day, a time of decision and the choice is ours... personal, individual...like all of life's "great" choices...its ours!

So, picture Jesus...looking back over His shoulder as He dismounts...and begins to move around the city....saying to His followers,

"I've gone ahead as you can see, so trust my lead and follow Me". And can't you see many of them...hesitating and thinking and saying...."To follow YOU I'm not content, until I know which way you went."

THERE'S A MESSAGE HERE FOR US

Yes, it's a "bitter-sweet" sort of day and it has a message that needs to be lifted up and taken away from here with us. Let me work in to it by sharing a story.

It was in the year 1815. Napoleon was threatening England. The Duke of Wellington got in his ship and sailed out into the English Channel to do battle in defense of England. He set sail to defend his country from the rapidly developing on-slaught of the famous Napoleon.

All of England waited anxiously for some news from the waterfront. There were no radios or telegraphs back in those days and so sentinels were posted along the coastline to pick up flag signals from the ships out there in the English channel. Finally, a watchman spied a ship as it began sending a message. It read: W E L L I N G T O N D E F E A T E D". And there the message ended...at that moment...because a deep, thick fog settled in over the Channel.

When this watchman got the message back to the people inland, you can imagine how frightened and how down-hearted they became. Their great Duke of Wellington defeated? They couldn't believe it. Now Napoleon would be coming across the channel, attacking their country and laying to waste their land. The people panicked and were just beside themselves.

The story goes that one day passed and then another. And then on the next day - the third day - an amazing thing happened. The fog began to lift at sea and as it did the ship out there in the channel, off-shore, was able to complete its message. It said,

"W E L L I N G T O N D E F E A T E D T H E E N E M Y"

And so the message of this Palm Sunday begins to break through to us. Yes, wait three days. Just when things look the darkest, just when it's all clouded in, just when everything appears to be impossible, wait three days... it's not over.

Don't misunderstand me. I'm not suggesting that there is something "magical" about the number three. There's nothing sacred about three days...but what is being said here is that God is able to do "in time" what might seem impossible to us at the moment. God is able to do "in time" what might seem impossible to us even in the light of "eternity".

FAITH AND TRUST

Back to the Bible, to the Gospel of Matthew and a verse that reads,

"Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered to the Chief Priests and the Scribes, and they will condemn Him to death and deliver Him....."
(Matthew 20: 18)

To me, that's the moment when the real parade began. It's not the moment when the crowd gathered with their palm branches and their shouts of "Hosanna". But rather it was that moment when Jesus turned His face, His mind, His heart and His body to the inevitable consequences awaiting Him once He set foot inside the city of Jerusalem. He knew what was ahead and yet He went.

We can talk of His courage...most important and it took enormous courage on His part of walk in that direction knowing He would suffer, that He would experience physical pain unlike anything He had ever known before. The city had a poor history of how prophets were treated. He knew this....but,

But more important than His courage was His faithfulness...His trust. He believed that God ultimately would somehow take care of Him, even when He was unable to take care of Himself. His faith and His trust are greater than His courage and this is such a big part of today's Palm Sunday message and of the Holy Week that is before us. The Christ that we shall be thinking about this week...and focussing on....makes tremendous demands upon us...upon our faith and our trust.

CLOSING Let this joyous, simple parade of palms, of children...help to remind you that God....that God is able to do in time what might seem impossible to us at a given moment. He has His own time-table.

Let this day remind you that you're never going to be strong enough to live your life from brute strength alone. You're never going to be wise enough to live your life from wisdom alone. You're never going to be brave enough to live your life from courage alone. But you will be "up" for some of life's toughest parades if YOUR FAITH tells you that you're not marching alone.

So, GO WITH HIM as He leads. FOLLOW HIM even though clouds of fog, doubt and despair and uncertainty blind you from the long view. Yes, wait...wait three days. Wait - in faith and in trust. The story of this day is the story of a good man...one man...who entered the city of His fathers...knowing pretty well what waited for Him there.

"O Jerusalem. Jerusalem...killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you....how often would I have gathered your children together....."

It is the story of a man on a donkey who was so "rooted" and so "grounded" in God and in the things of God that He willingly "set His face resolutely toward Jerusalem". In His heart of hearts he believed.....believed with all of His being that God is "able" to do in time what might seem impossible at a given moments or even in the stretches of Eternity. Remember these things and you will live well! "I've gone ahead as you can see, so trust My lead and follow Me."

PRAYER Expand our horizons this hour, O God...lest the trials and the troubles close at hand blind us in despair and doubt...and shut us out from the certainties that belong to all who walk the Hosanna Road with Jesus.

Loose the hosannas that sometimes stick in our sophisticated throats and overrule the pri e that makes us too rigid for a good parade. Let the child-like spirit in each of us come alive again this day that we may respond and

follow in His procession.

And now in the spirit of Him who continues to challenge our hopes, to probe our consciences, to haunt our dreams and to stimulate our spirits....in the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.