

"AN EPITAPH FOR PALM SUNDAY"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

Across the years I've spent a great deal of time in cemeteries. I think I've been in just about every cemetery in this metropolitan area. And, 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. Even as a teenager in High School upstate, I spent two summer vacations working in the Prospect Hill Cemetery...in the hometown - mowing lawns, digging graves and painting the fence around it.

When things got dull, I would often read the tombstones. Many of them are alike in shape and style, 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 is usually decided by the surviving members of a family.

DEVELOPMENT

For instance, like this one, "Here lies the body of John Blake, who stepped on the gas instead of the brake". Or, here's one that I came across in a little town in Yorkshire, England some time ago... the epitaph on a woman's tombstone. "Here lies the body of Margaret Bent, who kicked up her heels and away she went!"

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 you can imagine how I felt when my eye caught this one on the abbey floor (a sign of humility),

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

That's a good one...to have "family" buried there. But one of my real 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...one for Palm Sunday. I liked it when I first saw it years ago. The only trouble was that someone scribbled a bit of graffiti on it that said this,

"To follow you I'm not content, until
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 this day that has such a strong hold on our affections? We know it was a spontaneous event. There was no parade chairperson who worked long and hard ahead of time to make the arrangements. No banner committee. No clean-up committee. No reception committee. There was no Teddy Kollect at the city gate to greet Jesus and give Him the key to the city. No reviewing stand.

We have no way of knowing how many people "spread their garments" on that narrow road, or "cut branches" and placed them on the path ahead of Jesus, or shouted,

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

We've been led to believe that children were present and I'm sure they were and if they were, then it made for an even more festive and spontaneous occasion. It was exciting and I'm sure they had a good time and I'd like to believe that Jesus enjoyed it, too.....that there was a smile on His face.

That is, right up to the gates of Jerusalem. This was a parade that took place outside the city. I've walked this Hosanna Rode. The path comes up over a hill and then winds its way down the slopes of the Mount of Olives and in to the Kidron Valley and then up to the gates of the walled city of Jerusalem. Once Jesus entered through those gates, He was on His own and pretty much by Himself. The atmosphere changed. The parade stopped at the city gate. And the first verse that follows today's Palm Sunday reading sets the stage for all that was to come,

"And Jesus entered the temple of God and drove
out all who sold and bought in the temple."

If there was a sign posted at the gate of the city or over one of those tremendous arches, it might have read:

"LET ALL PROPHETS ENTER AT THEIR OWN RISK".

For those magnificent gates of Jerusalem represent a "tombstone" for the One who rode through them on the back of a donkey. Jesus knew it. Later that day, after cleansing the temple, He went back out to the Mount of Olives and gazed over the city and shed tears as He poured out these words from his heart,

"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 of the ingredients of any "true-to-life" human drama. Yes, there is joy and excitement. There is also truth and there is tragedy waiting in the wings. There is innocence and yes, there is also hope. We retell this Palm Sunday story each year because it wraps up so many ingredients of life and because it is also shedding a clear light upon the person of Christ. Jesus, our Christ. Even though it is a "bittersweet" sort of day, it still remains one of my favorite Sundays of the year. Truth and tragedy are mixed together. Before the sun set behind those Judean hills that day long ago, the joy of the morning was also disappearing. Yes, trouble was brewing and one of the greatest tragedies of human history was in the making.

I can picture Jesus looking back over His shoulder as He dismounts, and saying to His followers....."I've gone ahead as you can see...so trust my lead and follow Me". And in so many words I can see some of them, hesitant...and thinking, "To follow you I'm not content...until I know which way You went."

A MESSAGE OF PALM SUNDAY

A "bitter-sweet" sort of day for us and it has a message that needs to be lifted up. Let me work in to it by sharing a story.

Back in the year 1815, as 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 was going to defend his country from the rapidly developing onslaught 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 in the channel. Finally, a watchman spied a ship as it began sending back a message. It read, "W E L L I N G T O N D E F E A T E D". The message ended at that moment because a deep fog settled in over the English Channel.

When the watchman got the message back to the people inland, you can imagine how frightened and how gloomy they became. Their great Duke of Wellington defeated? They couldn't believe it and now Napoleon would be attacking their country and laying to waste their entire nation. 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 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".

A message of this Palm Sunday begins to "break through". Yes, wait three days. Just when things look the darkest, just when all is clouded in, just when everything appears to be impossible, wait three days...now, 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

To me, one of the most important verses in the New Testament story of Jesus is a verse found in Matthew's Gospel, Chapter 20. Verses 18. It 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..."

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

God would not want us to speak this day of the courage of Jesus. His courage is indeed important and it took enormous courage for Jesus to enter Jerusalem. He knew He would suffer, that He would experience physical pain unlike anything He had ever faced before.

But even more important than His courage is His faithfulness and His trust. Ultimately, Jesus believed that God would somehow take care of Him, even when He would be unable to take care of Himself. Faith and trust. You see it here in this Palm Sunday procession.

To me this is part of the message of this day we all love so much and of this Holy Week that we now prepare to enter. And the Christ that we shall be thinking about this week makes tremendous demands upon us - our faith and our trust. And so let this simple parade of palms help to remind you that God is able to do in time what might seem impossible to you at this moment.

And you're never going to be strong enough to live your life from 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 life's toughest parades if your faith tells you that you are not marching alone. So...GO with Him as He leads. And FOLLOW Him even though clouds of fog and despair blind you from the long view.

Yes, wait three days. Wait - in faith. In trust. The Story of Palm Sunday is the story of one man who entered the city, knowing pretty well what wait for Him there. "O Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you". It is the story of a man on a donkey who was so "rooted" in God and all of the good things of God that He willingly "set His face resolutely toward Jerusalem".

He believed with all of His being that God is able to do in time what might seem impossible at a given moment or even in the stretches of Eternity. Remember these things and you will live well.

PRAYER Expand our horizons, O God, lest the trials of the moment close us in to despair and doubt...and shut us out from the certainties that belong to all who walk the hosanna road with Jesus, Your Son.

Yes, loose the hosannas that stick in our sophisticated throats and overrule the pride that makes us too rigid for a good parade. Let the child in each of us come alive again that we may respond and follow in His procession. In the spirit of Him who continues to challenge our hopes, probe our consciences, stimulate our spirits, haunt our dreams...even Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.