

"BENEATH THE CROSS"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

Let me begin this Palm Sunday message by sharing with you a story about a man by the name of Clint Dennis. This actually happened on a Palm Sunday several years ago in a church down south. Clint was not what we would call a church-goer. It had been years since he had seen the inside of a church but something that Sunday morning was pulling him in the direction of church.

As he approached the front door of the church he became aware of a lot of people milling around...putting on long robes, tying ropes around their waists and then wrapping headdresses around their heads. A stranger came up to him and said, "Come and be a part of the mob...we're putting on a play". Apparently the church was re-enacting the crucifixion in costume that Sunday morning. He was invited to be a part of the crowd that on Good Friday would shout, "Crucify Him!....Crucify Him!"

As Clint stood there sort of wondering what to do, another stranger came up to him and said,

"The man who was supposed to play one of the thieves on the cross hasn't shown up...would you be willing to play his part?"

A first time visitor to this church, A somewhat unusual invitation, to be sure, but Clint agreed to do it and was shown to the cross where he would look on Jesus as Jesus was being put to death. About this time, something strange happened. Maybe it was Clint's awkward manner...but one of the other men in the cast asked him,

"You are a believer, aren't you? A Christian? You do believe, don't you, that He forgives our sins...have you ever asked Him to forgive your sins?" To which Clint whispered this soft reply, "No...I haven't...but that's... why I came here..."

And there...beneath the cross...Clint and this total stranger shared in a brief prayer together. They knelt and Clint asked the good Lord "to come into his heart and forgive him for his past". What the church people and this other man who invited him to pray did not know was that Clint had spent quite a few years in prison...doing time...for something like ten years. He was a real thief. And even after his release he had gone on stealing cars and trucks and what have you until he came to the realization that something was missing from his life and that he was headed in the wrong direction. Looking back on that Palm Sunday morning...strange the way things sometimes go. That Sunday morning brought a profound change in to Clint's life. "The Lord works in mysterious ways".

DEVELOPMENT

The scene changes. Back to the first century and the first Palm Sunday. The time had come for Jesus to make His way to the Holy City of Jerusalem. Jesus and His disciples had been traveling throughout the country side. A crowd followed them wherever they went. His teachings about the coming of the Kingdom had excited both the disciples and the people who had been following Him.

The disciples, of course, were wondering what would happen once Jesus entered Jerusalem and took power. And He tried to tell them what would happen. There were words about "suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and being killed and on the third day being raised", but they did not understand all of this. Remember it was Peter who said, "God forbid it, Lord...this must never happen to You!" The disciples, yes, had their expectations.

But so too did the crowds. They thought Jesus would quickly establish His Kingdom and overthrow the hated Romans. They thought something wonderful was about to happen and they were going to be a part of it. On the first Palm Sunday expectations were running high. You could sense it; you could feel it. Something was about to happen. And something did happen!

JESUS FULFILLED A PROPHECY

First-off, Jesus fulfilled a beautiful Old Testament prophecy. Recall the scene. On the outskirts of Jerusalem, with the Holy City looming clearly in their view, Jesus sent two of His disciples ahead to find a donkey and a colt. He said,

"Go into the village ahead of you and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to Me."

You have the feeling that Jesus is very much in control of the situation. That He was not a victim of circumstance. He told them that if anyone questioned them all they were to say was, "The Lord told them." And everything happened just as Jesus said it would. Centuries before a man by the name of Zechariah had prophesied of this day, saying,

"Lo, a young king comes to you...triumphant and victorious...is he...humble and riding on a donkey."

Jesus fulfilled this ancient prophecy from the 9th chapter of Zechariah, verse 9.

Father Henri Nouwen tells of finding a sculpture of Jesus on a donkey in the Augustiner Museum in Frieberg, Germany. He calls it one of the most moving Christ figures that he knows. The 14th century sculpture originally came from a small town close to Breisach on the Rhine. It was made to be pulled on a cart for the Palm Sunday procession in that little town.

Henri Nouwen found himself drawn to this sculpture. He sent postcards of it to his friends and he keeps one in his prayer book. Looking at the face of Jesus, he reflects on this piece of art...

"There is melancholy, but also peaceful acceptance. There is insight into the fickleness of the human heart...but also immense compassion. There is a deep awareness of the unspeakable pain to be suffered, but also a strong determination to do God's will. Above all, there is love, an endless, deep and far-reaching love born from an unbreakable intimacy with God and reaching out to all people, wherever they are, were, or will be. There is nothing that He does not fully know. There is nobody whom He does not fully love."

Jesus rides upon a donkey fulfilling an ancient prophecy, but clearly in total control. He knows what will happen to Him in Jerusalem. Still He rides on. He does not seek to avoid the task to which He has been called.

David Brenner, the comedian, use to do a Superman routine that he borrowed from the Superman movies. Superman is confronting one of the bad guys. The bad guy shoots bullets at Superman and Superman smirks and throws out his chest and the bullets bounce harmlessly off Superman's chest. Remember what happens next. Brenner said,

"And then when the bad guy ran out of bullets, he would throw the gun at Superman and Superman ducked...."

He ducked. Chances are you've never thought about this before and I didn't until this week. The bullets bounced harmlessly off him, but when the gun was thrown...he ducked. Now this "profound" insight will serve to remind us that Jesus did not have to enter Jerusalem. He could have "ducked" that mission, His mission, but He chose not to and He still rode on. He had that freedom...

THE PEOPLE CELEBRATE

Meanwhile, the people celebrate. And what a joyous celebration it was. Jesus no sooner got on the donkey and started down Hosanna road than the crowds that followed broke into cheering. Mark tells us that,

"They spread their cloaks on the road...and others cut branches from the trees and spread them out on the path. And people ran ahead of Him, shouting, 'Hosanna'".

The time and the moment had finally arrived. Jesus was about to act...to really act. He would first enter Jerusalem like a conquering King entering the capital city to claim power for Himself, so they thought.

The city was already overflowing with people celebrating Passover. And when they saw Jesus approaching...riding on a donkey...their hearts soared and they came alive with excitement. Spontaneously they joined in the shouting,

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

A lady tells about Palm Sunday in her church. She says that it was their tradition to celebrate Palm Sunday with members marching outside the church waving palm branches and palm leaves as they sang the Palm Sunday hymns. But she said that because they all knew that Palm Sunday was but a prelude to the harsher events of Holy Week, a prelude to Good Friday...this congregation was careful not to get too worked up, too excited, too giddy. After all, as she put it,

"We already know, as Paul Harvey says....'the rest of the story'"

Yes, it's hard to put your whole heart into the triumphal entry of Jesus into His city when you know what is coming next...nails and crosses and spear... She offers this comment,

"And so the adults always seem to hold back...and some-

how we think if we don't get too exuberant with the palm frond on Sunday, maybe we can escape the nail on Friday."

That first Palm Sunday crowd was filled with excitement as Jesus made His way into the Holy City. The people were filled with great expectations. They did not hold back their celebration and their love for Him in any way!

FOR JESUS THERE STOOD THE CROSS

For Jesus, however, above all the shouting and the waving of palms, there stood the cross. He was not deluded by the cheering crowd. He had a pretty good idea of what was next on the agenda, I think. He knew what He must do. For Him there was no turning back.

Another story that helps to open this up to us. This is about a man who was the "narrator" for his church's Easter cantata a couple of years ago. Just as they were about to step into the sanctuary to sing, the pastor of the church came up to him and asked him if he would be willing to carry the cross out at the end of the service. The person who had volunteered hadn't gotten there. The narrator nodded that "yes", he would be glad to do it...without giving it a second thought. He recalls that as the cantata got under way, he had a lot of time between narrations to think about what he had volunteered to do. From where he was standing, he could see the cross at the front of the church. He began to sort of wish that the pastor had asked someone else...why had he asked him. He thought to himself,

"And I thought to myself...I'm really not worthy of doing this." Other thoughts began to come into his mind.

And these thoughts distracted him from what he was supposed to be reading in the cantata. His eyes kept returning to the cross. And the end of the service, the pastor brought the cross over and handed it to him. He was struck by the size and the weight of it. He said,

"It wasn't a very big cross...but at that moment it seemed very large and heavy to me. And the walk from the front of the church to the back seemed longer than usual...and a part of me wanted to get it over with...to get out of there and put it down because I really didn't feel that comfortable with it...but then something happened."

"When I got out into the narthex, I turned and watched as the children of our church started to come out of the sanctuary. A little boy looked up and touched the cross and asked me, 'Did Jesus really die on a cross like this?' It was about all that I could do to say 'yes'. I did manage to get it out....and I remember what happened next. His little face lit up as he began to comprehend, probably for the first time in his life what Jesus had done for him. And as I put the cross down, I felt very pleased that I had been given the opportunity to carry it."

On that first Palm Sunday, Jesus knew that before the week was over, He would be carrying a cross through the streets of that city. There would be no turning back. There would be no cheering crowds. He knew what He had to do to fulfill God's will.

He had to offer up His life for a world weighed down with human sin, human suffering and selfishness.

CLOSING STORY

I remember once hearing a story about a bell in Korea that is famous for its beautiful and compelling sound... and tone. I hope I can remember this story well enough to make it touch you as it touched me when I first heard it. This bell had been commissioned by an ancient king as a way of showing the devotion of the people to Buddha. The advisors to the king had told him that making a huge temple bell would secure the nation from foreign invasion. The specialist who cast the bell had produced several failures until he concluded that the best way to produce a great bell was to sacrifice a young maiden.

Soldiers were sent out into the countryside to find and fetch such a young girl. Coming upon a poor mother in a farm village with her small daughter, they took the child away, while she cried out piteously, "Emille, Emille!" "Mother. Mother. Mother" she cried. And when the molten lead and iron were prepared, the little girl was thrown in. At last the bell maker succeeded. The bell, called the Emille Bell, made a sound more beautiful than any other bell ever cast in that land.

When it rang, most people praised the art that had produced such a beautiful sound, but whenever the mother whose child had been sacrificed heard it, her heart broke. And her neighbors, who knew of her sacrifice and pain, could not hear the beautiful tone without feeling that pain, too.

DO YOU HEAR IT?

Only those who understand the sacrifice can truly feel the pain. Others just enjoy the sound. What do you hear as you reflect on these events which Holy Week ushers in. Is it just the sound? Or do you understand in some measure the sacrifice that was made, on our behalf. Jesus fulfilled an ancient prophesy. He set His course and did not waver. He finished the race. And, yes - He did it for you and for me.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your nearness and Your presence, O God, here in this service on Palm Sunday. Yes, we enjoy the sound of palm Sunday "hosannas"...the cheering of the crowd...but do we truly understand the divine mystery of what took place...of the sacrifice that was made on our behalf in the events of Good Friday. Help us to feel something of His pain as we try to follow in His steps...not only this week, but in days beyond. This we ask in His name - who for us is the way, the truth and the life. Amen.

"Beneath the cross of Jesus, I fain would
take my stand...the shadow of a mighty
rock within a weary land...."

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, April 4, 1993 / PALM SUNDAY

GREETING / VISITORS

- A. A warm welcome to the visitors who have joined us here this morning to celebrate Palm Sunday. Hopefully, we'll get to greet you in a more personal way...either at the door or, time permitting, at the coffee hour downstairs.
- B. Be free in the sharing of your name...fill out a visitor card, sign one of the guest books. Come, worship with us...come and work with us....
- C. The roots of this church are deep in the soil of this part of NY City...doing the Lord's work at this busy corner since 1837. We minister in the name of Christ and it is in His loving spirit that we greet you on this April Palm Sunday.

HOLY WEEK

- A. Palm Sunday ushers in Holy Week...we now enter the most important week of the year for the Christian....and as we enter, note the announcements regarding Easter lilies (today is the deadline)... an envelope is in the pews. Remember the Maundy Thursday Service of Holy Communion...6:30 on Thursday evening. Good Friday...a time of reflection at the foot of the cross...twelve to one. Our thanks to those who put together the Palm Sunday breakfast.
- B. Next Sunday we shall come together at eleven to celebrate the JOY, the EXCITEMENT, the VICTORY of our EASTER FAITH. One service. A full church...arrive at 10:30 if you wish to get your regular seat.
- C. Palm leaves will be distributed at the door. Love loaves are being received. Late gifts for the ONE GREAT HOUR OF SHARING are still coming in...let me thank you for your generous response of last Sunday to my special appeal. Over \$ 500 has been received!
- D. Remember that baskets - Easter baskets - are being made today during the coffee hour for the Yorkville Common Pantry. Lend a hand and let's do as well as we did last year when we put together something like _____ baskets.

OFFERING

- A. Jesus said:

"It is more blessed to give than to receive". In this spirit then, let us worship....

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PASTORAL PRAYER: April 4, 1993 / Palm Sunday

HELP US, O GOD, to worship You...."in spirit and in truth". Remind us, in these quiet moments, that more things are wrought by prayer than this world has ever dreamed.

TOUCH OUR LIVES, we pray, with healing strength,
cleansing pardon,
steadiness of vision,
newness of life.

ON THIS PALM SUNDAY, we would call to mind that joyous day long ago when Our Lord, Jesus, rode into the city of Jerusalem.

We remember how the people of that great city went out to greet Him...to welcome Him, and to open their hearts to Him.

We confess to You our faithlessness to Him - we who like ancient Jerusalem have so often greeted Him with professions of faith, with our bursts of enthusiasm, who have been willing to follow Him when He demanded so little of us,

and ere the week has ended have betrayed Him with neglect, with indifference, with coldness of heart.

GRANT US, O GOD, that this hour and this Holy Week into which we now enter may bring to us a new vision of His way and His Word, that it may bring to us a deeper understanding of what it means to follow in His path -

"More ready to serve than to be served,

To give and not to count the cost,
To fight and not to heed the wounds,
To toil and not to seek for rest,
To labor and not to ask for any reward,

Save that of knowing that we do His will!"

COME CLOSE, THOU GOD OF COMFORT - to those present this hour with some special need on their heart. Where there is fear, bring faith; where there is guilt, grant forgiveness.

ACCEPT our praises and the hosannas we sing. In the name and spirit of Jesus, we pray.