

"DEMONSTRATIONS AND DECISIONS"

INTRODUCTION

Some there are who may have trouble understanding the events of that first Palm Sunday. The Gospel accounts of that day and of the days that immediately followed do not blend easily with some of the pictures that we carry around with us of a Jesus who was always unassuming and unobtrusive, a "gentle Jesus, meek and mild". As we review carefully the events of that day long ago, we find that they do tend to jar some of our own cherished notions about Jesus simply bringing peace to persons and never disturbing the peace of populations.

For to translate the Gospel accounts of that first Palm Sunday into the language of our time, Jesus was the central figure in a demonstration that took place in the city of Jerusalem. You'll recall that he was an outsider - a citizen of Nazareth, 75 miles to the north, and as he came to the city with his friends in a certain springtime, he said to two of them: "Go to a certain place and bring me a donkey that you will find there" - very much as though this detail of the demonstration had been carefully planned in advance. And then when he was astride that beast of burden, the procession began, and as it made its way toward the gate of the city, it attracted attention and colled followers - the faithful, the curious, and perhaps the critical.

DEVELOPMENT

We call it the "triumphal entry into Jerusalem", but it wasn't exactly that in the mind of Jesus. It was also something of a protest march, and shortly after arriving in the city he went to the Temple and proceeded to drive out the money changers, protesting what they had done to the House of God. It was also something of a "pity march" - for Luke tells us there were tears in his eyes, "And when He drew near and saw the city He wept over it" and through the tears came those words which have a searching relevancy for the day in which we live:

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem....would that even today you knew the things that make for peace! But now they are hid from your eyes".

Yet most of the marchers were not so interested in protesting as in proclaiming, and they began to sing, as marchers so often do, "Blessed be the King who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna". And some of them were carried away with enthusiasm, and they lined the path of the procession with palm branches and with their coats.

It must have been one of the strangest demonstrations that Jerusalem had ever witnessed. Think of it. The man at the center of the march was not making a political claim, but rather a spiritual claim. He was riding not on a war horse, as a symbol of force, but on a donkey that was the symbol of quietness. Instead of carrying spears and swords, those who were with him carried palm branches. It was, in our parlance, a peaceful, non-violent demonstration.

But a demonstration it definitely was! The Gospel accounts agree on that. Jesus did not slip into the city under the cover of darkness. He chose to come into the city in the most dramatic way he could think of. He led a march on the city to let people know he was there, not just as a tourist, or pilgrim, or observer - but as one who made some claims upon their lives. And that he caused some consternation by his methods is confirmed by a line in Matthew's Gospel that reads:

"And as he entered Jerusalem, a shock ran through the entire city...."

I should think so! And a decision concerning him would have to be made.

A DEMONSTRATION: FIRST MEANING

This past week as I thought about this sermon, and reviewed that first Palm Sunday demonstration, it came to me that, in a sense, all of Holy Week represented a demonstration.

The dictionary gives us two clear meanings of the word, "demonstration". First, "a public display of group feeling towards a person, a cause, or action of public interest". Clearly, there was that kind of demonstration in Holy Week - at its best on Palm Sunday when the crowds cheered and cried, "Hosanna...praise him" - and at its worst on Good Friday when the crowds jeered and cried "crucify him".

It's that kind of demonstration that many people today are wary of - the noise, the disruption, the emotional and sometimes irrational behavior of crowds, the possibility of conflict, and certainly the challenge of change. But let me say this. Demonstrations are a form of communication. Demonstrations can be constructive and positive and lead to change that is for the good. I have participated as some of you have participated in demonstrations in recent years. And I think that before one is tempted to denounce all demonstrations, that one should remember that a sizeable part of our heritage has been shaped and sealed through precisely this kind of public demonstration.

A corrupt church was shaken in the Middle Ages because a German monk by the name of Martin Luther posted some paragraphs on a church door, rallied some people, and started them singing hymns in that century's version of a freedom march. And out of those events was birthed a new church. And this nation of ours was born, in part because of some angry, protesting patriots in the city of Boston demonstrated and dumped a load of tea into Boston Harbor. And women vote today because a few of them insisted on demonstrating in behalf of woman suffrage.

It was a year ago this week that Martin Luther King was assassinated. On that Thursday night a year ago, after news of his death came to us, we turned on the television sets and saw on flashbacks a day in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955 when Dr. King organized the Negroes in support of a woman who declined to move to the back of a bus, because her feet were tired from shopping and maybe her soul was tired from being pushed around. And there were flashbacks, too, of another day in August of 1963, a day some of you may remember for you were there, when Dr. King led a bi-racial March on Washington in support of a bill to give Negroes the simple privilege of voting as American citizens. So much of that March on Washington was in the spirit of that first Palm Sunday March in Jerusalem. So good men still lead public demonstrations, and good men still get killed - and Easter comes and still dares to say that "though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet".

A DEMONSTRATION: SECOND MEANING

Which leads us to the second meaning of the word "demonstration".

It is not just a "public display of group feeling towards a person, a cause, or action of public interest". There's another - a deeper and a wider meaning, "Demonstration - the act of making known or evident by visible or tangible means..." And this deeper kind of demonstration can be by a crowd or a person; by a word or a deed, by a leader or a follower - "the act of making known or evident by visible or tangible means".

In this sense, by this definition, do you see what a demonstration was Holy Week? First off, Palm Sunday was a demonstration of Jesus' claim to kingship in their lives. Monday, he entered the Temple and over-turned the tables of the money

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changers, and this was a demonstration of clean, healthy, positive anger and also of great courage. Thursday night, in the Upper Room, when he washed the feet of his disciples, this was a demonstration of his humility and servanthood. Friday was the demonstration of sacrificial, redemptive love at work. And Sunday was the demonstration of a triumphant power, greater than all the forces of evil. Right here in these events of Holy Week, we see in dramatic fashion, God's supreme demonstration.

Several years ago a ministerial friend of mine wrote a book on the events of Holy Week and he entitled it, "Seven Days That Changed the World". Our first reaction may possibly be, "well, they didn't change it enough....not enough to make a real difference, to really notice it....." Eve Curie was in something of the same mood back in 1943 when she sat on a hill overlooking Jerusalem and addressed these words to Jesus:

"You told us to be kind and forgiving, but for twenty solid centuries, wretched, incorrigible men have gone on being merciless, full of violence and of hatred. Religious men and atheists alike have lived and ruled in a non-Christian way - and look at us now: we've never been in a worse mess....."

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Perhaps one part of our nature identifies with that - and yet another part of us does not - simply because of that cross that shines there before us, quietly reminding us that there were seven days that changed the life of the world for us, and that nothing can ever be quite the same again. There in that demonstration, in that cross that would not stay put on the hill outside of Jerusalem, that would not stay branded as an instrument of shame - there is the supreme demonstration of a love that gets down into human life, that shares our suffering, that whispers to us of our stature as children of God, and insists on facing us toward the dawn.

There is something personal and something persistent in that cross, relentless in its pursuit as a beam of light coming from the moon across the waters and following us along the sea-shore on a clear night. Move either way, to the right or to the left, and that beam of light continues to lie directly between you and the moon. So it is with the cross. Argue as you will, doubt as you desire, close your eyes and your mind to it as you can, run as fast as you can, and there it is still - God's supreme deed in a man - following us, loving us, inviting us.

In every generation of every century, there have been those who have tried to arrange God's funeral and proceed to act as executors of his estate, but there is still the cross and there is still Christ in a demonstration of a power that will no more be finished off this Friday than it was on the original of that day that men call Good Friday. I remember hearing John Baille, one of Scotland's great theologians, say to us in a class room in Edinburgh: "The crucifixion of Jesus Christ set more men thinking than anything else that has ever happened in the life of the human race". And not only set men thinking, but it also set men stretching, responding and risking. Could it be that that demonstration in Jerusalem from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday is the most important thing that ever happened with regard to your life and to mine? My friends, I believe that it is!

I hope you see it, feel it and experience it this coming week: that there is still divine love at work here - a love that will not leave us alone with our selfishness and self-centered living - that will not leave us alone with our righteousness - a love that will not leave us alone with our fears, our sorrows, our burdens - a love that will not leave us alone. Issac Watts put it this way in a hymn

We can ignore them for a while, but sooner or later a decision has to be made concerning them.

written for the 18th century, but which even today has overtones of meaning for us:

"When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride"

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an offering far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all"

A DEMONSTRATION DEMANDS A DECISION

Which leads us to this final word. Demonstrations are hard to ignore. ~~Yes they are a form of communication.~~ They say something to us, and sooner or later, we must make a decision concerning them.

In the demonstration of Palm Sunday, the people of Jerusalem had to make a decision concerning Jesus and the message of love and truth he was proclaiming. And before nightfall, some had made their decision and they were plotting how to get rid of him. As His challenge grew sharp, they ~~let him be~~ led out to a hill called Calvary. When Jesus offered his people life, they rejected it. When He invited them into the Kingdom of right relationships, they declined the invitation. They refused to accept what he had to give them. There is, to me, an infinite sadness about Palm Sunday. It is a strange kind of day in which sadness is mingled with joy. It is the deep sadness of something glorious and beautiful rejected and refused. There they were - on the threshold of life - yet they refused to go in. So near and yet so far; so wise and yet so foolish. And to increase the sadness, the rejection had continued through the years. Person after person, and nation after nation, have not been willing to make the necessary changes in order to accept the rule of God and entrance into the Kingdom of right relationships.

And yet - mingled with the sadness of that day's demonstration, there is still some of the joy of that first Palm Sunday, for the royal figure of Jesus is still somehow mysteriously before us. In spite of rejection after rejection, that royal figure still goes on before us - haunting our memories, challenging our hopes, stimulating our spirits, probing our consciences. And after all these years, and all these failures on our part to accept what he has to give us, he still makes the promise:

"If you are willing to submit to the rule of God, God will give you new life; but the rule of God is the rule of love in all of our relationships - and you cannot have the life unless you are willing to love"

Will you accept that? Are you willing to take the chance, to run the risk. That is offer, that is the promise - and the decision is yours to make.

"Once to every man and nation
Comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of truth with falsehood,
For the good or evil side;
Some great cause, God's new Messiah,
Offering each the bloom or blight,
And the choice goes by forever
Twixt that darkness and that light"

PRAYER Ride on, ride on in majesty, O gentle divine invader. Enter our cities, take captive of our homes, and purify our hearts. Open our eyes that we may see and know and live those things which belong unto peace. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen