

## "PALM SUNDAY - A DAY OF DECISION"

### INTRODUCTION

In the story of Jesus, Palm Sunday is a day of decision.

You can drift.....but just for so long, and then the time comes when you must make up your mind, one way or the other. You can court a girl for just so long, and then the time comes when you have to make up your mind - to marry her or not to marry her. You can let a bad, degrading habit go on for just so long, affecting your emotional and physical health, and then you have to make up your mind whether you're going to let it continue indefinitely, or change things.

And if you drift beyond a certain point, you become a drifter, and a drifter is a person who has lost the power of decision, and a person who can no longer make a decision is a person who is not going to do much in life. So there are D-days, days of decision in life, and in the life of Jesus, Palm Sunday was such a day.

### JESUS AND HIS DECISION

His own decision, of course, came first - His decision that is to go to Jerusalem.

It was not a question of distance, for Jerusalem is about as far from Galilee as New York City is from Albany. Rather it was a question of approach and of strategy. Jesus began His work upstate in Galilee quite informally, approaching people and appealing to them one by one - a fisherman, a tax collector, an adulteress, a narrow-minded legalist, a rich young ruler, a soldier, a perplexed intellectual....and so on, one by one, person to person He made His pitch.

But the time came when He had to decide whether this informal approach to individuals was sufficient for fulfilling His great mission in life, and He decided that He must approach the city - the people there, speak to the nation. There was only one city for the Jew, and that city was Jerusalem. There's only one city for the English - London; one for the French - Paris.

Jesus was not unfamiliar with the difficulty of making great decisions. This one He made, as He had made others earlier in His life - quietly, cleanly, calling into play those great resources of His inner life, and one day He announced it to his friends in simple, direct words: "Behold, we go up to Jerusalem". He arrived there in the city on the Sunday before Passover. The city was crowded with people from all over Palestine. He came into the city on a donkey. There was no attempt to conceal His arrival, nor was there any other way by which He could have made it clearer to His people that He had not political ambitions or aspirations for earthly power. Every Jew knew that the donkey was the symbol of the powerless King of Peace. And so Our Lord rode into the city on that humble beast of burden, doing everything He could to quiet the people who were cheering Him and hailing him as an earthly ruler.

Upon arriving, He went first - not to the governor's house either to greet him or confront him - rather He went first to His Father's House, to the great Temple, and when He got there He cleared away the things that didn't belong there in an action that has become so familiar to its hearers that it has lost something of its original impact. Can you imagine though how this must have surprised people! It was bold, daring, courageous - not the sort of thing you would have expected Him to do.

In anger, He cleared out the things in the porch of the Temple that did not belong there....money changers, men selling animals for sacrifices....things that were connected with Temple worship, but not essential to it and which detracted from it. "My Father's House is a House of prayer, and you are making it a den of thieves" He ~~screamed!~~

~~He blew His cool, we'd say,~~ and after that He went every morning to the Temple and there met the people - openly, informally - as He had always done and let them ask questions. Some of those questions were so searching. What about paying taxes to Rome? (People had taxes on their minds that week, too) And what about a woman who has had seven husbands? Who is going to have her in the next life? And which is the first and greatest of all the commandments of the Law?

His intention in going up to Jerusalem was to offer a new life "in God" to the nation, to the city, just as He had offered it to individuals. He knew well that in going up to Jerusalem He was placing his life on the line. It was as though He were saying to the city: if only you will submit to this rule of God, you shall have new life....new health of mind, body and spirit. But remember that this rule of God involves the rule of love. You cannot have that life unless you are willing to practice this rule of love in all relationships.

Now it was His own decision to go to Jerusalem. No one was forcing Him, no one made it for Him. It reminds us that no one can make our decisions for us, too. The great decisions of life have to be made by the individual involved. He made His decision. The next decision would be the city's decision - to accept Him and what He was offering, or to reject Him and dispose of Him.

drama begins to unfold.

#### THE CITY AND ITS DECISION

The ~~story~~ of Holy Week continues. Jesus was not only in the city, but He had done something in the city.

He had actually interfered with the life of the Temple. This was dangerous. His presence might have been ignored, but His deliberate actions could not be! I suppose a man can get up on his soap box over here in front of Gimbel's and say anything he wants to say, and as long as he does nothing but talk, the city can let him go. But if that same man should go into City Hall or St. Patrick's and interfere with the life of either place, turning things upside down, someone will have to make a decision: do we let him do this, or do we stop him. His actions and innovations would have to be accepted or rejected.

You know how the city of Jerusalem voted. Many of those who were out there on the street on Palm Sunday cheering him with "hosanna" were, before the week was out, screaming "crucify Him". Why did this rejection occur? Let's think about some of the reasons.

#### MAJORITY DIDN'T WANT HIM

For one thing, the majority of people did not really want Him.

I think they wanted His cures, but not His criticism. They wanted to be made well, but had little desire to be made good. They wanted Him when He was healing their sick, but not when He was staking out the way to the cross. In a nutshell, they wanted Barabbas, and this is who they got. According to Passover custom, the Governor would release to the people a political prisoner and when Jesus was on trial, Pilate proceeded to do this very thing. He asked them: "Whom do you want me to release to you - Barabbas, or Jesus". And they cried out for Barabbas, and Barabbas they were given.

As you think about that you cannot help but wonder: are people today any different? I should like to think they are. If we had to make that decision how would we vote? Are the majority of people today any different? The majority of people today really don't want Christ - not Christ crucified....not the stern and disciplined rule of God in their lives....not the high demands of the Gospel. As

I see it, many people today don't want to be committed to anything; they want to be free to come and go as they please. They want freedom from responsibility. They really don't want to be committed to anything or become involved with anything that might make demands upon them, that might involve sacrifice. Am I wrong?

I do not say this out of cynicism. Those of you who follow the preaching of this pulpit most of the time know how hard we try to see every shred of goodness in human nature, in people, and how we love that goodness and try to build on it. I say this because today we stand under the shadow of the cross. The Christ we think about this coming week makes great demands upon us. I cannot say anything else. The majority of people then did not want Jesus, and this was part of the reason why He was rejected....turned down by the city.

LEADER NOT READY TO ACCEPT HIM

Another reason for the rejection had to do with the leaders of the people in Jerusalem.

They simply were not ready to accept Him.

Right from the beginning they recognized in Him their own mortal enemy. They were smart enough to know that if they accepted Him, their religion would have to be changed from top to bottom. The Temple, for instance, would once again have to become a House of Prayer for all people, and not a banking House. The well-to-do hierarchy that controlled the Temple life would have to become, once again, the servants of the people. Routine performance of religious obligation would have to be replaced by a real dedication of the spirit to God's will. The Law, so precious to them, would have to be re-written so that the emphasis was not so much on the performance of things done - number of services attended, coins put into the treasury, but upon what they were like on the inside.

The Law would have to be re-written. There would have to be a place in it for sinners, for Gentiles, for undesirables. And moreover they knew (and this was so hard for them to take in) - they knew that if they accepted Him that all hope of putting together any kind of a military revolt against Rome would have to be forgotten. They knew that their love of the Law would have to be replaced by a real Law of Love - and that such a Law would include enemies as well as friends.

They also knew that the life of the individual would have to be turned upside down - that the individual would have to begin to trust God rather than himself; that he would have to put God's will before his own will. And all of this, put together, all of this was just too much for them...too big a price to pay, too many risks to run, and the leaders voted to reject Him and what He was offering. It was thumbs down! You know the rest....

HIS FOLLOWERS WERE SILENT

You begin to wonder, at least I do: was there no one at this point who was for Him, who "hung in there"?

I think that there were many who were still rooting for Him, and this leads us to the final reason why He went to the cross.

Yes, there were many whose lives had been touched, helped, healed, lifted by his life and love, many who were trying to keep the Word of God as they saw it in Him. But they kept silent and never said a word. They were there....in Jerusalem for the Passover. They were there and they might have turned the tide. Their voices were drowned out by their timidity and fear.

And those people, I suppose, in some way represent or resemble a great many of us. We accept Him. We don't reject Him. We love Him, or at least we're drawn to Him, admire Him. We respond; we hold Him up before our children as the ultimate

ideal of human life. ~~We sing about Him with great fervor.~~ But so often....in so many hidden situations....in crucial, critical moments we remain silent. We betray Him by silence, inaction, ~~not letting others know how we feel,~~ not standing up and being counted on His side.

OUR DECISION His decision. The city's decision. Finally, (and briefly) our decision.

For the strange and unbelievable thing is that this same royal person, this man on the donkey, who once rode into ancient Jerusalem still haunts us today. In spite of rejection and after rejection across the centuries, He still goes on before us - haunting our memories, yes and probing our consciences, stimulating our spirits, and challenging our hopes. *This man in whose*

*see life's h. hope & deepest m.* to us  
He confronts us with a decision regarding Himself. He not only comes as individuals...this He always does. But He also comes to the city, this city, to the great centers of power that radiate out from here. Dr. Sockman use to say "As this city goes, so - in time - goes the nation". There's an element of truth in that observation....all the more reason to dig in and keep his spirit alive, his influence strong in this city. And so today He comes down Fifth Avenue and Park Avenue, and the other great avenues of this community....to the people. He made His decision long ago. And what the decision of this city will be depends on people like ourselves who today pass in and out of the churches of New York. To accept Him - His style, His way and to make the Master of all life - or to reject Him. The choice is before you. The decision is yours.

The striking words of the late Studdert Kennedy complete this sermon.

"When Jesus came to Golgotha they hanged Him on a tree,  
They drove great nails through hands and feet, and made a Calvary;  
They crowned Him with a crown of thorns, red were His wounds and  
deep,  
For those were crude and cruel days, and human flesh was cheap.

When Jesus came to (New York) they simply passed Him by,  
They never hurt a hair of Him, they only let Him die. Him  
For men had grown more tender, and they would not give pain,  
They only just passed down the street - and left Him in the rain!"

PRAYER Help us, O God, as we try to follow Jesus through the crowded ways of the city into the Temple and then out to the Mount of Olives. Open our minds as we hear him answering questions; set our hearts free to feel for Him and with Him as He goes to his death; and above all, give us the will to put our trust in Him and to pledge our loyalty to Him, that in spite of all doubts that beset us and all the evidence of darkness and evil, we may follow steadily in His train, on to the cross and to life. Amen