

"PALM SUNDAY - A DAY OF CONTRASTS"

INTRODUCTION

When you stop to consider it, the events of Palm Sunday present a study of rather strange and striking contrasts, and in those contrasts we find something of a clue to the true meaning of this day.

THE EXCITEMENT OF THE PEOPLE AND THE QUIETNESS OF JESUS

I think the first and the most obvious contrast is the contrast between the excitement of the people and the quietness of Jesus. The pilgrims were pouring into the city of Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. They were coming from far and wide. Many of them had never seen the city before. Children were screaming for joy; the inns were filled beyond their normal capacity; the streets were crowded; the shops and the bazaars were doing a flourishing business. The holiday season was in full swing. The arrival of Jesus added to the general excitement. As one of the Gospels puts it: "As he entered Jerusalem, a shock ran through the entire city". For one thing, his friends were keyed up to the highest pitch. This was a great day for them. His enemies were excited. They were running around in circles, rushing frantically from Pilate's palace back to the courts of Herod - plotting and planning, plotting and plotting. You can almost hear the noise of the city. You can almost feel the tension and the confusion.

The only one who was not excited was Jesus - which really is strange when you stop to think about it. He might have been the one who was in a real state of panic. He had good reason to be. But not so as he rode into the city quietly - without pretense and without protection. He made little response to the demonstration that his friends were staging for him. And when he finally went into the Temple, he just looked around, observed what was going on there, took it all in, did nothing and said nothing, and then went out of the city to a little town a few miles away for the night. Here was a man, you see, who knew where he was going, who knew where he had come from, who knew perfectly well what he was in for, who knew what he stood for - lived for - had come for. I would venture to say that he was the most calm, unperturbed person in the city that day. He had that kind of quietness and steadiness that is a sign of a deep seated security.

We pause to reflect upon this observation as we think of this particular contrast between the excitement of the crowds and the quietness and serenity of Jesus. Still waters, someone has said, run deep. If that be true, it may also be true that deep waters run still. It is worth remembering especially in those moments when we are apt to be whipped up into a frenzy by the swiftly moving currents of life - it's worth remembering that the creative energies of life move quietly. A great tree falls to the ground with a thunderous crash; it grows, however, without a sound. It is not the rabble rouser who determines the course of events; it is the quiet men who know where they are going - where they come from - what they stand for and live for. It is the men like the quiet men in the White House in the 1860's...."with malice toward none, with charity for all. These are the men who ultimately determine the destiny of nations.

Scientists tell us that the most violent storms, as they sweep over the ocean, disturb the water only a few hundred feet below the surface. The hurricane which lashes the sea into a foaming fury, causing shipwreck and disaster, is unable to affect the depths. Below the turbulent waves there is peace and calmness. In a similar way, the one who gets beneath the surface of life and lives in its spiritual depths can find the peace of God which passes the understanding of man. The quietness of Jesus was not that which comes from being undisturbed; it was a quietness of spirit which resulted from a complete committment of himself to the keeping of God. This quietness of the spirit of Jesus will do more to steady our lives than all the pills and tranquilizers one can take.

WHAT THE PEOPLE WANTED
AND WHAT JESUS WANTED

There is a second contrast. It is the contrast between what the people wanted and what Jesus wanted. The people, as you may recall, wanted a king. They had good reason for wanting one. They needed one. They were weary of armies of foreign powers marching through their cities year after year, and they knew that if they were ever to achieve independence, they would have to have a leader, and the only kind of leader they knew was a king. Jesus had some of the qualifications for this position. He was a leader of men. This was obvious from the beginning. He had that unique gift of leadership, the power of drawing men and infusing them with his ideas and ideals. It was only natural that they think of him as a candidate for this position. They wanted a King, and they wanted Jesus to be their king. This is what they were trying to do.

But the last thing in the world that Jesus wanted to be was a king. He was a plain man; he hated all of the pomp and ceremony that is normally associated with royalty. He was an uncompromising man. He loathed the intrigue that is bound to be involved in ruling a people in a political way. He was a gentle man, and had nothing to do with force and violence, excepts on one or two occasions. Armies and military plans and all of the other things we normally associate with a roayl personage, Jesus had no interest in. Above all, he came to serve, not to rule. He told them this over and over again. But they didn't seem to comprehend it.

I suppose if he thought of ruling at all, it was not to rule over people in an external way - with law and authority, but rather to rule within people - in their hearts. He found people offering him the service of royalty, and he had come to show them the royalty of service.

Just one comment on this particular contrast. Could we not say that by and large, the ruling influences of life come not from the kings, but rather from the servants of humanity. Think, for a moment, of the ruling influences in your own life as you look back over the years. The ruling influences of your life....who have they been? Who are they? Have they been the people who have lorded it over you with the weight of external authority, those who have been in a position to tell you what to do and what not to do? Or were they the people who loved you and cared for you - parents, for instance, who were always

ready to understand you no matter what you did, teachers who went to great lengths to open the winds to greater truths, friends who have seemd to have had an inexhaustible appreciation for you which you felt you didn't deserve, doctors and nurses who have been ready to do anything for you to help you when your bodies got into trouble. These are some of those who have ministered to us on the different levels of life, beginning with the physical and going right up to the highest level, people who have fed our inner nature and given themselves in order to help us. They are the ruling influences in our lives. Can we not say that the ruling influences in the world more often than not come from the servants of mankind. And can we not say that the real servants have in the final analysis have something regal, something wonderfully royal about them.

THE JOY OF THE DISCIPLES
AND THE SADNESS OF JESUS

There is one further and final contrast, and it is the most significant one of all. It is an amazing one,

quite dramatic when you stop to think about it....almost tragic when you contemplate it. It is the contrast between the joy of the disciples and the sadness of Jesus. The disciples were beside themselves with joy. This was their great moment. Their hero was coming in to his own, being recognized - one whom they held in great affection, one whom they had followed and been with for many a day. Along with the crowds in Jerusalem, they were part of this royal welcome.

But then we read this line, "But Jesus - when he drew near and saw the city wept over it". Look at it this way, if you will...if it is not irreverent to put these two things side by side. Imagine one of the New York City welcomes given on occasion to some national hero...like the one we gave John Gleen two years ago. They said, at the time, that it compared with the one given to Lindbergh....only greater. Picture the crowds, the flags, the cheering, the ticker tape, all of the excitement, the shouts for joy. What would you think if you found the hero in tears? In that case they might be the tears of deep emotion, but in the case of Jesus, they were tears of great disappointment....tears of extreme sadness.

Perhaps he knew that it didn't take much to excite people. He knew that this demonstration didn't mean too much...that everybody love a parade (not just the Irish)...that anybody can draw a crowd (look at the crowds that the Bettles drew). It doesn't take much. He had been used to the crowds following him. In a sense, this wasn't anything new. But as he thought about it, he must have entertained the thought that what he wanted to do was not so much to draw a crowd, but to draw men out of their narrow, selfish selves. To draw them out of themselves into a new way of life. This was what he had been talking about, trying to do, - it was a risky way of life...giving life in order to have it, and, when he looked around at the temple, he saw no signs of that life. It was still the same old, grasping, conventional, ecclesiastical pattern. When he looked at his own friends, he saw so few signs of that new life. Here they were competing for places of honor in the kingdom he was to establish. As he looked at the people who were shouting praises of

joy, he saw so few signs that they had been drawn into that new way of life. Behind this royal reception they gave him, he could see the ultimate rejection. This new life meant they would have to change their ways, and so many of them were not ready to do so. Herein lies the tragic note.

And I suppose that in a sense things are not greatly different today. The churches are well filled this day. There's no reason why they shouldn't be, every reason why they should be because there is something attractive and appealing about this man Jesus. There is something in him that gets through to people moves them and stirs them even though they may deny him intellectually and neglect him morally. Nevertheless, there is something about him that goes deep into people. In our better moment, we know that he is the answer to life. We want him...

But, we can't run our businesses along his lines, or at least we think we can't. We can't even run his church a great deal of the time in his spirit of love for all people...his church, inclusive, a house of prayer for all men regardless of their background, their color. We can't believe that love is able to do all things, or we think we can't. We can't love our neighbors, let alone our enemies. We can't seem to put all of our trust in God. We say we can't do these things. We think we can't. Tragically enough, I'm afraid the majority of us have never tried very hard to know whether we can or not. There are some who have tried and their report is that once you try, it isn't as impossible as it seems, and there comes an amazing new resource of strength to help you do it.

I hope that all of you will know and understand what I mean when I say that this day puts before us the fact that we are in a real sense split personalities. We want him desperately and I suppose this is why people are drawn to a service like this. But we can't bear to give up our own life and really believe that when we give life, we have life. And so in the midst of all of our "hosannas", we go right on much of the time at least, looking out for our own interest, standing up for number one, ready to cut down anyone who gets in our way, preparing to slaughter the other half of the world.

Underneath the royal welcome, there is this sad undertone of rejection. In these Palm Sunday contrasts, we see with a light that is so glaring that we hardly dare keep our eyes on it, we see ourselves - our own divided selves. But thank God, we also see Jesus - in the midst of panic and excitement, unperturbed, quiet. Disappointed, but not defeated. A servant, and yet a king. Our question, then, is the question that was asked by a bewildered, confused man whose name was Pilate: WHAT SHALL I DO WITH JESUS. This is the question I leave with you on this Palm Sunday: WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO WITH HIM.

"Once to every man and nation, comes the moment to
decide.

In the strife of truth with falsehood, For the good
or evil side"

PRAYER As we try to follow our Lord and Master into the city of Jerusalem where he was hailed as a king, help us, O God, to show forth in our lives something of his incomparable spirit - to follow in his steps, more ready to serve than to be served, that we may lose our lives and find them in him. We ask this in recognition of all our divided loyalties. Help us always to remain loyal to him. Amen