

"PALM SUNDAY - A DAY OF DECISION"

INTRODUCTION

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

You can drift, but just 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 one way or the other - to marry her or not to marry her. You can flounder around the business world for just so long, doing this, that, and the other thing, and then the time comes when you have to make up your mind and choose one course and stay with it. You can let a bad, down-grading habit go just so long, and then you have to make up your mind whether you want to let it go on forever, or whether you want to change it. You can let a country go just so far on its free, easy and materialistic way, and then the time comes when the people must make up their minds, one way or the other, which way they want it to go.

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 man who can no longer make decisions is a man who is not going to make much in life or of his own life. So there are D-days, days of decision, in every man's life, and in the life of Jesus, Palm Sunday was the day.

JESUS AND HIS DECISION

His own decision, of course, came first, his decision to go to Jerusalem. It was not a question of distance. Jerusalem was only a hundred and fifty miles from his home town. Rather it was a question of approach and strategy. He began his work in Galilee quite informally, approaching people and appealing to them one by one. One was a fisherman, another a tax collector; there was a beggar, an adulteress, a narrow-minded legalist, a rich young man, a soldier, a perplexed intellectual - and so on - one by one, and person by person he made his appeal. He gathered a few of them together into a small group for more intensive teaching, and that group was often the core of a large group - a multitude in fact.

But the time came when he had to decide whether this informal approach to individuals was sufficient, and he decided that he must approach the city - the people as a nation. There was only one city for the Jews just as there is only one city today for the French, and for the English, London is the city. For the Jews, there was only one city and that city was Jerusalem.

Jesus was not unfamiliar with the difficulty of making great decisions. This one he made, as he had made others earlier in his life - cleanly and quietly, and he announced it to his intimate friends in these simple, direct words: "Behold, we go up to Jerusalem". He arrived in the city on the Sunday before the Passover. He rode 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 plainer to his people that he had no political aspirations or intentions whatsoever. Every Jew knew that the donkey was the symbol of the powerless king of peace. Jesus rode into the city on that humble beast of burden, with no pretention to any kind of earthly power at all, and doing everything he could do to quiet the people who were hailing him as an earthly ruler.

Upon his arrival, he went first, not to the governor's house either to greet him or to trouble him - no, he went first to his Father's house - the Temple - and when he got there he cleared away the things that did not belong there in an action which we have become so accustomed to hearing about on Palm Sunday that it has lost some of its original impact. But this action must have greatly surprised the people who saw him do it. It was so bold, so daring, and not exactly what you would have expected him to do.

I'm sure you're familiar with the scene and you remember how he cleared out the things in the porch of the Temple that did not belong there - the money changers and the men who were selling animals for the sacrifices, all things which were connected with the Temple worship, but not essential to it, and which greatly distracted from it. You remember his words: "MY Father's house is a house of prayer, and you are making it a den of thieves". After that he went every morning to the Temple and met the people, quite openly, informally, as he had always done and let them ask questions. Perhaps you remember, too, how searching those questions were, even the ones which have been preserved in the Gospels, and there must have been others, too. What about paying taxes to Rome? (People had taxes on their minds even in his time). What about a woman with seven husbands - in the next life whose wife would she be? (At the rate that Elizabeth Taylor is going, she would have found that one to be of interest). And which is the first and great commandment of the Law? These are just some of the questions, and he dealt with them all and taught the people.

His intention in going to Jerusalem, as I read the story, was to offer the nation, the city, as he had offered it and given it to individuals, a new life in God. He knew well that in going to Jerusalem he was placing his life in great danger. It was as though he were saying to the city: if only you will submit to the 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, and you cannot have that life unless you are willing to practice this rule of love. It was his own decision to go to Jerusalem. No one made it for him, and this in itself reminds us that no one can make your decisions for you. Life's greatest decisions have to be made by the individual, by the person involved. It was his own decision to go to Jerusalem, and the next decision would be the city's decision either to accept him or reject him.

THE CITY AND ITS DECISION

Jesus was not only in the city, but he had done something in the city. He had interfered with the life of the Temple. His presence might have been ignored, but his deliberate actions could not be. A man, I suppose, can get upon a soap box in Washington Square here in our own city and he can say many things, but so long as he does nothing but talk, the city can let him go. But if that same man should go into City Hall and interfere with its life, turning things upside down, figuratively speaking, the city would have to decide: shall we let him do this, or shall we stop him. Some action would have to be taken one way or the other. His innovations would have to be accepted or rejected.

You know how the city voted. Many of those who were cheering him with "Hosannas" on Sunday were, before the week was out, screaming "Crucify Him". Why did they reject him? Have you ever really stopped to analyze it. Different reasons could be suggested, but let me put three reasons before you this morning.

For one thing, the majority of the people did not want him. They wanted his cures, but not his criticism. They wanted to be made well, but they 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. To put it in a nutshell, they wanted Barabbas and this is what they got. You'll recall that Pilate, the Governor, according to custom would release to them at the time of the Passover, one of the prisoners and when Jesus was on trial, he proceeded to do this very thing. And when he asked them whether they would have Jesus or Barabbas, they chose Barabbas and Barabbas they were given.

I sometimes wonder as to whether people today are any different. I should like to think they are, but occasionally I have those dark moments when I wonder if they are. I'm afraid that the majority of the people today are not a great deal different, and I cannot pretend that they are. The bulk of the people today, as I see it, don't want to be committed to anything. They want to be free to come and to go as they please. The majority of people today don't want Christ - not Christ crucified - not the stern and disciplined rule of God in their lives. They want a tranquilizer; a ranch house with two cars; they want social security; they want lower taxes and higher wages and shorter hours. They want freedom from responsibility. They don't want to be committed to anything or become involved with any thing that might make demands upon, that might call upon them to sacrifice something. I do not say this out of cynicism. Those of you who follow us all the way, all the time, know how hard we try to see every shred of goodness in people, and how we love that goodness. I say this because today we are standing under the shadow of the cross, and I cannot say anything else. The majority of the people then didn't want Jesus, and this is the first reason why he was rejected by the city.

And then in the second place, the leaders of the people in Jerusalem were not ready to accept him. I think they recognized in him right from the beginning, 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, once again, would have to become a real temple and not a banking house. The wealthy hierarchy that controlled the Temple would have to become, once again, the servants of the people. Routine performance of religious obligations would have to be replaced by a dedication of the spirit to the will of God. 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, the number of services attended, the amount put into the treasury, but upon what they were like on the inside, and why they did what they did.

The Law would have to be re-written. There would have to be a place in it for sinners, for undesirables, for Gentiles. And moreover they knew, and this was most difficult for them to accept, they knew that if they accepted him that all hope for 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 of love included enemies as well as friends. They knew, too 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. All of this was too much for them - too radical, too big a price to pay, too many risks to run, too much was involved, and they rejected him and what he had to offer.

You wonder - was there no one at this point who really wanted Him? I'm sure there were many people who were for him, and this leads us into the third reason as to why he was rejected. There were many whose lives had been touched and helped and healed by his life and who were trying to keep the Word of God as they saw it in Him. But they kept still and never said a word. They were there. If they were for him, they never let anyone know it. They might have turned the tide. We can't be sure of this, but they might have turned the tide in the other direction. And those people, I suppose, in so many ways represent a great many of us. We accept him. We don't reject him. We love him, at least we admire him and hold him before our children as the ultimate ideal of human personality. We come to church and we sing about him with great fervor. But so often - in so many hidden situations, in so many crucial and critical moments of life, we betray him by remaining silent. We just let him go by....

This is a deep seated habit of ours, this keeping still when we ought to be speaking out. For instance, we think the country is going mad for material things, but we never say so. We think that atomic warfare is wrong, and that if it ever is begun it will end the human race, but we almost never say anything about it. We think that the Church should be a House of Prayer for all people, but when an issue comes up in which that principle is involved, not many of us say what we think. We let it go. We don't want to start a fuss. We think it's wrong that the church should be split up into so many denominations in this country, that Jesus never meant for this to be the situation, and when an opportunity comes along for us to take a great step forward toward church unity, we suddenly become very conscious of our own particular heritage and hesitant as to whether we want to move toward church union, and so we say nothing. Time and again we would rather go with the crowd in the wrong direction than strike out by ourselves in the right one. We think Jesus is the way and the truth and the life. Nine out of ten of you here today think that way, but in any office situation or any discussion group where this is questioned, have you ever said it. Never forget that Jesus went to the cross because people like ourselves who were for him did not say a word. They held their peace.

The city made its decision. On Palm Sunday he entered Jerusalem. Five days later he was nailed to a cross. The majority of people didn't want him. The leaders couldn't tolerate him. And the few people who were for him kept still. It's a familiar story.

OUR DECISION

The decision of Jesus - the decision of the city - and now our decision. For the strange and unbelievable thing is that this same figure who once rode into an ancient city still haunts us today. In spite of the numerous rejections of Him across the centuries of time, he still goes on before - haunting our memories, probing our consciences, challenging our hopes, stimulating our spirits. Even in this materialistic country of ours which has wandered so far from anything like the pattern of his life, his image still appears - constantly, daily, everywhere.

And so we as a people have to make a decision concerning Him. He not only comes to us as individuals. This he always does. But he also comes to the city - this city. For America - there is only one city, and that is this city. And as this city goes, so goes the nation. We sometimes forget this. Today he comes down Fifth Avenue

and Park Avenue, and the other avenues of the city - to the people. He made his decision long ago. What the decision of this city will be depends to a great deal on many of you. Never forget that. To accept Him and to make him the Master of your life, or to reject Him. ~~The decision is yours to make.~~ The choice is before you - and the decision is yours to make....

"Once to ev'ry 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."

LET US PRAY: Accept these thoughts of ours, Go God, and lead us out into a greater appreciation and understanding of thy truth as it has been revealed to us in the life of Jesus Christ. Give us the power to make right decisions at the right time; help us to think clearly, so that we know what the decisions to be made really are, and then give us the grace to follow in His way. Amen