

INTRODUCTION

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

You can drift...but just for so long, and then the day comes and the time arrives when you must make up your mind - one way or the other. I think 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 these D-days - days of decision in our lives - and in the life of Jesus, Palm Sunday represents such a day.

JESUS AND HIS DECISION

Of course, His own decision 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, 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 approach, His pitch.

But the time came when He had to decide whether this informal approach to individuals was really sufficient for fulfilling His 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; one for the American - New York.

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 these simple, direct words: "Behold, we go up to Jerusalem". He arrived there 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 no 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 out there cheering for Him and hailing Him as an earthly ruler.

ON HIS ARRIVAL

Upon arriving, He went first - not to visit the Governor - either to greet him or confront him...rather He went to His Father's house, to the 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 us that it's lost something of its original impact.

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, ~~that did not belong~~, 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; you are making it a den of thieves". Bold, daring, courageous action on His part.

After that incident in the Temple, He returned there every morning of that week to meet 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? 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 the greatest of all the commandments of the Law?

His intention in going to Jerusalem was to offer a new life "in God" to the nation, to the city - just as He had been offering 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 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. You cannot have this life unless you are willing to have this rule of love in all your relationships.

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, dispose of Him.

#### THE CITY AND ITS DECISION

in the city.

The drama of Holy Week begins to unfold. Jesus was not only in the city, but He had done something

He had actually interfered with the life of the Temple. This was dangerous. His presense might have been ignored, but His deliberate actions could not be. A man or a woman can get up on his soap box over here in front of Gimbles and say anything he or she wants to say and as long as he does nothing but talk, the city can let him go. But if that same person should go inside the store and interfere with the life of either the offices or the counters - 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? Why did they vote Him down?

#### 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 nutsheal, they wanted Barabbas, and this is who they got. According to Passover custom, the Governor would release a political prisoner and when Jesus was on trial, Pilate proceeded to do this very thing. "Whom do you want me to release to you - Barabbas or Jesus". They cried out for Barabbas and Barabbas they were given.

Are people today any different? I should like to think they are. If we

we had to make that decision how would we vote? Are the majority of people today any different? As I see it, 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 claims. As I see it, so 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. Am I wrong?

I do not say this out of cynicism. Those of you who follow 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 we stand under the shadow of the cross. The Christ we shall think about this 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.

#### LEADERS 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 life of the Temple 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 - the 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. 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 - so 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, was just too much for them...too big a price to pay, too many risks to run and the leaders of the Temple voted to reject Him and what He offered. Thumbs down on Jesus and before the day we call Palm Sunday was over, the leaders were plotting how best to move Him from the center of the stage.

#### FOLLOWERS WERE SILENT

You begin to wonder, at least I do: was there no one at this point who was for Him. I think there were many who were still rooting for Him, and this leads to the final reason He went to the cross.

Yes...many there were whose lives had been touched, healed, helped, lifted by His life and His 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 celebration. They were there and they might have turned the tide. But their voices were drowned out by fear and timidity.

And those people in some ways represent a great many people today. We accept Him. We don't reject Him. We profess our love for Him, or at least we're drawn to Him, admire Him. We respond. We hold Him up before our children as the ultimate ideal. But so often...in hidden situation...in crucial and decisive moments we remain silent. We betray Him by our silence, or perhaps our inaction, or our hesitation in letting others know how we feel about Him.

OUR DECISION

Palm Sunday. A Day of Decision. First, His decision.  
Second, the decision of the city. Finally, 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 after rejection across the centuries, He still goes on before us - haunting our memories, challenging our hopes, probing our consciences, stimulating our spirits - this Jesus of Nazareth in whom we have come to experience life's highest hopes and its deepest meaning.

He confronts us with a decision regarding Himself. He not only comes to us as individuals...this He always does. And there may be that person in our church today who is ready to make a personal decision to accept Him. But He also comes to the city - this city - to the great centers of power that radiate out from here. "As this city goes" Dr. Sockman use to say, "so...in time...goes the nation".

And so today He comes to us...down Fifth Avenue and Park Avenue and the other great avenues of this city - to the people. He made His decision long ago. And what the decision of this city will be depends on people like ourselves who this day pass in and out of the Churches of this great city. To accept Him - His values, His way of doing things, to make Him Lord and Master of all life - or to reject Him. The choice is before us. The decision is ours. "Once to every man and nation comes that moment to decide".

Somehow the words of the late Studdert Kennedy kept making their way back into my mind as I put these Palm Sunday thoughts together. With them, I close:

"When Jesus came to Golgoth 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.  
For men had grown more tender, and they would not give  
Him pain;  
They only just passed down the street - and left Him in  
the rain!"

PRAYER

Help us, Lord God, as we try to follow Jesus through the crowded ways of this city into the Temple and 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, to pledge our loyalty to Him, that in spite of all doubts that best us and all evidence of darkness and evil, we may follow steadily in his train. On to the Cross, and on to greater life. Amen