

"PALM SUNDAY - MAJESTY ON THE MOVE"

INTRODUCTION

"Pussy-cat, pussy-cat, where have you been?
I've been to London to visit the Queen.
Pussy-cat, pussy-cat, what did you there?
I chased a little mouse under a chair."

What a pity to settle for a mouse when one might have seen the queen! What has this got to do with Palm Sunday.

I suspect there were many in the crowd on that first Palm Sunday in Jerusalem who undershot their opportunity, too - many who failed to grasp the significance of what was happening. It's true that every "happening" can be experienced on a variety of levels. Some, perhaps, that day enjoyed only the excitement and the exhilaration of a good parade. Some, I'm sure, simply wanted to catch a glimpse of the man of whom it was rumored He brought Lazarus back from the dead. Others were grateful for the Passover homecoming that would enable them to be in touch once again with friends and family from other parts of Palestine. Still others, aware of the growing tension between Jesus and the authorities of church and state, thirsted for the showdown that was now sure to come since Jesus was now in the city.

Only a few, less than we are prone to imagine, sensed what was really up - a city, a culture, a religion, a people were living out their moment of truth. And the rigor of the test was intensified by the fact that Jesus was in action, in motion - calling them to a confrontation, to a decision.

"Hosanna! Blessed be he who comes in the name of the Lord.
Blessed be the kingdom of our father David that is coming!
Hosanna in the highest!"

Watch Him as He comes! See Him as He passes! Follow Him as He goes! Majesty - in action, in motion, on the move.

DEVELOPMENT

Jesus, it seems, was always in action, in motion, on the move. He crowded a great deal of activity into those three short years, and always without a sense of flurry or a sign of panic or a note of pressure.

Wherever one touches down in the Gospels he becomes aware of this motion. "Passing through the midst of them He went away". "Let us pass over unto the other side". "He entered into Jericho and was passing through". "As He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth". Motion. Action. The verbs always seem to be suggesting movement. Movement.

Jesus was busy all right. One has the impression that whoever sat down with Jesus had all of Him that there was for those moments, but that He would soon be off and moving to another place to help someone else. Samuel Johnson was bothered by the busyness of John Wesley. Boswell reports his hero saying,

"Wesley's conversation is good, but he is never at leisure.
He is always obliged to go at a certain hour. This is very disagreeable to a man who loves to fold his legs and have out his talk, as I do"

Like all who are propelled by a vision from within, by an urgency of work to be done, Jesus was alive with a sense of all that remains to be accomplished.

A man in motion. Majesty on the move.

A GOD WHO ACTS THROUGH HISTORY

But something more is involved in this motion and this movement of Jesus. One of the things that is symbolized in this pageantry of Palm Sunday is that God speaks to men through actions in their history. Let's think about this for a few moments.

If, in what Whitehead called, "The Galilean Vision" the Eternal has been disclosed to mankind, then we know that God is not a problem to be solved, a proposition to be mastered, an essence to be discerned, but a worker to be joined! In other words, He is up to something in the world. He has a will for His creation that involves the whole universe. He shares this work with us. He calls us to participate in it. And it is "real" work - not simply "busy" work to fill a few idle moments throughout the hours of a day. It is a work in which even God himself is becoming. Writes Kenneth Cauthen:

"God is at work in the structures of the given world, in the concrete processes of every man's experience, in the galaxies as well as in sub-atomic phenomena, in the evolution of new biological species as well as in the development of a metropolis."

THROUGH ISRAEL

Our Biblical faith reminds us then that God called a people, Israel, to help him work his purposes out. They were not called to settle down and build a lasting civilization. They were called to be a mobile, useful, servant people - the "bearers of a vision". Their prototype was a man, Abraham, who "went out not knowing whither he went". Their battle-cry was to "make straight in the desert a highway for our God". The divine majesty that confronted and inspired them was always a certain majesty "in movement". A pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. A flaming bush, a small voice, now famine, then pestilence, here war, prophets coming and going, arriving and departing.

Huston Smith, in his book, The Religions of Man, points out that "The real impact of the Jews lies in the extent to which Western Civilization took over their angle of vision on the deepest questions life poses". And one of the most significant contributions is tied in with this belief of knowing and experiencing God in the movement of history - not in some isolated contemplation of the divine essence apart from the action of people. The religious question is always the life question and the life question is always the religious question. The points of decision to which we are called are to be found in our history, not in some disciplined mental removing of ourselves from the currents of history. God speaks to men through their history, through actions in their history.

FOR US TODAY

And for us the God question is posed when we reckon with such things as race and sex, poverty and war.....when we reckon or when we are made to decide whether we will value for themselves money, property and status - or see them as a mean to a higher end and greater purpose. Many there are in our churches today who insist that the church should get back to "spiritual" matters, implying that the great issues of our day having to do with the city, with things like poverty, race, war, national priorities are altogether extraneous to faith. Life question is the religious question.

I am trying to suggest today as a part of our Palm Sunday worship that God confronts us in the ever moving events of our own history. It is in our actions, our inaction, our decisions, or indecision that we know Him or deny Him. "Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord". He is always coming or moving off. He does not stay. As Lowell put it in his great hymn:

"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"

THE RESPONSE

The only proper response to a God who acts is a servant who follows.

The implicit cry of Palm Sunday can be summed up in two words, "Follow Me". Follow me to Gethsemane, to crucifixion, to resurrection, to witness, to service. The word obedience comes in to play. The word loyalty is involved. These are words that help us to greater understanding in the Kingdom of God. This is why Ralph Sockman was fond of noting that most of us enter the kingdom "feet-first", rather than "head-first". Through obedience and a deepening loyalty we respond to his call....as we do, we come to a greater understanding of what it's all about!

But it is always obedience in some immediate situation that is required of us. The confrontation does not continue in one stand. The question will not be frozen at one point so that we can drop it at our pleasure and pick it up again easily at some future time. A lifetime of continuing decision is involved. "Behold, He goes before you into Galilee". This is the tenor of New Testament thought. "So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and suddenly He was there in their path". This is where we find him.

There are voices that continually cry, "America, back to God!" - as though there were some "locu" behind us to which we could make our way. Is it not better to speak of "America - on to God". Better still, "On with God". For the majesty we reverence is always on the move. God is forever "in transit, in motion" - which is to say that God comes to us in life situations. Not above them, or behind them, or around the, but through them.

THE CALL OF PALM SUNDAY

The way that you and I respond to the glimpses of this majesty is of deep concern. ~~God has a purpose.~~

~~This is underlying the event of Palm Sunday.~~ Man has a future else Jesus would not have said, "Follow me". The majesty is in motion, but it does not render our lives trivial, for He yearns to bring us back into alignment with a purpose that really matters!

Who was it who said, "All the world's a stage". Many of us prefer not to be actors on that stage, but critics of those already in the action. The call of Palm Sunday is a call to participation in the work of God, an invitation to forego the stance of critic or non-participant and to become a fellow worker with God in the world.

Back in those days when men believed in the Ptolemaic view of the universe, they comforted themselves with the illusion that earth was the center of everything. All the stars and planets and heavenly bodies rotated around the earth. When Copernicus discovered that the earth turned around the sun, he shattered the composure of many. Some of us still hold a Ptolemaic view of ourselves and assume that the world turns for us. We see our small ventures as the heart of what it's all about. How sad! How mistaken!

The good news of Palm Sunday is that we need not stay in the back waters of some small unworthy purpose. God calls us into the mainstream of history to effect his will. When the majesty goes by and eternity speaks, some respond. All

the scattered fragments of their lives come together as they see themselves the servants of the living God for which they were born.

As a boy reared upstate in the foothills of the Adirondacks and then as a college student in Vermont, I had opportunity from time to time to try my hand at skiing. Over the years I have often wished that my weekends might be as long and as free as some of my good friends in this parish. I know enough about skiing to know that when one goes skiing, each skier had better stick to the grade of slope he can handle. When families go skiing, each member tends to go his own way according to his ability. Out of a snow covered mountain in Vermont a few weeks ago came the story of a man who cried out half in desperation: "I've lost my wife. I've lost my children. And now I've lost my trail". "Somebody, please help me".

Who knows, perhaps there is some person in the congregation today, Palm Sunday, who may be in a similar situation. For those who have lost the trail, remember there is a majesty passing by. And above it a voice calls out saying, "Come and follow me."

"To every man there openeth
a Way and Ways and a Way,
And the High Soul climbs the High Way,
And the Low Soul gropes the Low.
And in between, on the misty flats,
The rest drift to and fro.
But to every man there openeth
a High Way and a Low,
And every man decideth -
The Way his soul shall go"

PRAYER Eyes we have, O God, but we see not. Ears, but we do not hear. Help us to trace thy form and to discern thy voice calling to us through what is going on within us and around us now. Sanctify to us the days of our lives by embracing them within thy will and enriching them with thy great purposes for us and for all mankind. And lead us on. In the name and spirit of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen