

"PRELUDE OR FINALE?"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
March 28th, 1999

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### INTRODUCTION

Victor Borge has a comedy routine that's a real classic. He sets his music on the ledge at the top of the piano and then he begins to play it. And it sounds fine to us. But something doesn't sound quite right to him and after a few measures, he stops playing and stares at the music for a few moments. And then suddenly a light of recognition flashes and he reaches for the music, pulls it close to his face and then turns it right-side-up and begins to play again. And all the notes sound the same, except that they're now being played exactly in reverse order! As I say, it's delightful!

That's something like these stories crowding the last week in the life of Jesus...before He goes to the cross. Which way do you set the music? Which side is up? We wonder...is it a prelude or is it a grand finale? Is it the beginning of His royal reign, or is it the sad conclusion to His aborted, tragic, pathetic story? Prelude or Finale? Let's think about it...

It's the week that resounds with music: the shouts of the crowds as He enters Jerusalem - the songs of the children as He makes His way up to the Temple area, the psalms and hymns they sing at the Last Supper...nauseous chants for death by crucifixion, and those mournful dirges at the foot of the cross. Some are preludes to glory. Some are finales of grief, bewilderment and loss. We get mixed signals from the events of this week...Passion Week, we call it. We have trouble distinguishing the "Hosannas" and the "Hallelujahs" from all the weeping and wailing.

### PALM SUNDAY SEEMS LIKE A PRELUDE

Let's start with Palm Sunday. That's where we are today and in many respects Palm Sunday has the feel of a triumphant prelude. Jesus is making His debut to greatness. "Hosannas" fill the Spring air. Yes, the songs of the children. It's a Sunday morning parade in Jerusalem and everyone loves a parade. Everyone turns out for it.

If I were to film it, I'd pan the crowds in slow motion, pausing here and there for a moment on certain faces. There's Mary...over there, near the gate, mother of Jesus. Oh, just look at the expression on her face! Her eyes are shining through those tears rolling down her cheeks. A mother lives for a moment like this. She can't say a word...the pride is stuck in her throat, but her heart is pounding and her thoughts are yelling to Him above the commotion of the crowd..."Oh, Jesus (she seems to be saying)...I'm so proud of You, Son!" Her hand covers her mouth...holding in all that threatens to overwhelm her. And God, in heaven, hears her silent prayer...."You can take me anytime, Father. My Son has made it....My dear Son!" "Isn't He wonderful...just look at Him"..

As her image plays across the screen, I'd be tempted to play Aaron Copeland's stirring prelude, Fanfare For the Common Man...for that's what this is all about. And if you don't think so, watch as the images change.

Look at the disciples! They are there - front and center...not about to be pushed aside at a time like this. This is what they've been waiting for...three long years. Remember their arguments on the road up in Galilee....during those years of following Him around. One of these days Jesus is going to "make it" and we'll be there, next to Him, to share in that glory. It's now!

It was a lonely path - that road to glory. Not many were part of the parade back then. But they were with Him from the beginning and some day their devotion and loyalty will pay off - BIG! John is itching to be the Minister for External Affairs. James wants to be the Governor General...think he's cut out for that task and Judas...well, Judas, will be in charge of the Finances. He'll have the Financial Minister's Portfolio. That's an important job.

Who would have ever thought it? Watch the images change. Three years ago? Hungry days and sleepless nights....stomping for a candidate who really never even threw His hat in the ring. Now, suddenly, the polls are surging and the media is paying attention. Everyone wants an interview with Peter and Matthew. This is the REAL THING. They surround Jesus like a bodyguard. They're His inner circle and everyone better pay them some attention and respect. What a day!

And the children....why they're out there, too...lining the parade route. See that young lad over there. They say he's from Nain. He's got a Jesus story to share. They say that Jesus first met him at another parade, two years ago. Really wasn't a parade...it was a funeral procession. They were on their way to the cemetery when Jesus and His company ran right into them. The pallbearers were carrying that lad on a platform hitched up on their shoulders and the boy's mother trailed behind, crying and wailing...bitterly. No one was supposed to stop their parade, but Jesus did!

Didn't Jesus know that the cars with their lights on have the right of way? I guess He didn't know that. He just stood in front of them and they had to stop. And then He reached up and took the lad's cold hand and spoke a few quiet words and suddenly that boy sat up - alive! Jesus then lifted Him down. They say the pallbearers didn't know what to do. They even forgot to lower the platform. But Jesus hugs him in His arms and then He begins to lead Him over to his mother. Not a bad parade - that one! Sort of like the death processions down in New Orleans - the marching band slowly shuffling to the largo beat of dirge music on the way out, but spritely stepping to a swing song on the way back.

And now, every year at this time, that boy from Nain and his mother, go up to Jerusalem for the Passover. They have so much to be thankful for and wouldn't you know it? This is the year that Jesus makes His grand entrance and there the boy stands among the other children...waving, shouting and beaming. Boy, he is going to have something for the "Show and Tell" time when he returns to Nain. And the other kids in his school that day won't go home without hearing his story at least five times.

This is one great day! And years from now, folks are going to sit around and retell the story of these hours over and over again. "Yes...I was there that day in Jerusalem when Jesus came in!" "I remember it well". "Let me tell you about it!" "We knew Him when He was just a young man...getting started". And folks will gather around and listen and nod in wide-eyed wonder!

But Jesus had more going for Him that Palm Sunday than just popular recognition. There were some tremendous legends out of their past that pushed Him along, too. Prophecies. Matthew remember some of them, especially the words of Zechariah, five centuries earlier...

"Your King comes to you....riding on a donkey!"

And the crowds that line the street remember that word, too and they shout, "Blessed is He Who comes in the name of the Lord!" They know those prophecies out of their glorious past and they're ready to see them come true that day. It's time for a Messiah...time for a return to the throne of David. It's time to chase those nasty Romans out of our land and to find a place in the sun for the lost glory of Israel. There's power in a great tradition.

I remember once reading that Oscar Levant once talked himself out of a speeding ticket. He had been rushing along, far above the posted speed limit, when lights and sirens pulled him over. He told the police officer that he had been listening to the music of Beethoven...the last movement of Beethoven's 7th Symphony, he said....and you can't possibly "go slow" to that compelling music!

And so it was in Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday. The music of the Kingdom Prelude swelled, got stronger and louder and more moving, more powerful and everyone was caught up in the sound of it, in the rush of it...or so it seemed...but not everyone.

NOTES OF THE GOOD FRIDAY FINALE WERE ALSO BEING PLAYED AND HEARD

At the same time,

however, the notes of the Good Friday Finale were also beginning to be played and heard by some. Those notes, shall we say, began to "swell", too. and before the shadows of the night fell, those "swelling" sounds were getting stronger as men met in the shadows of the buildings and began to talk, plot, and take action. Calvin Miller has a line that goes this way:

"Humanity is fickle. They may dress for a morning coronation and never feel the need to change clothes to attend an execution in the afternoon..."

And we know the story well. There's Judas late on in the day, slinking into the shadows around the great Temple...ready to strike a deal. On Palm Sunday he's there shouting with the crowd while his mind is already scheming with the opposition. The rest of the Twelve run fickle and leave Jesus pretty much alone when the heat is turned up. Even powerful Peter will curse out a finale, rather than humming this prelude tune too long. And all around them, a bevy of amateur conductors is slowing down the beat. This is the finale they've all been waiting for.

The glorious music of Jesus comes to an end. The Sanhedrin plays a part. Any score to them is a good one so long as it slows Jesus down and eventually sends Him to the cross. Take a picture of Pilate, up there, too...he has the conductor's baton for a few fatal moments and measures. His wife sends him a strange message suggesting he change the tune, but the weaving of the music has caught him in its web. Even when he conducts a popular but brief referendum and offers the crowd a choice, "Do you want Jesus A or Jesus B - Jesus Barabbas or Jesus of Nazareth?" Even when he throws the question to the feet of the people the music of the sad grand finale sweeps them along..."Give us Barabbas and crucify the Other One - Jesus!" And the curtain begins to fall.

JESUS HAD ANOTHER VIEW OF THINGS

But Jesus Himself had another view of things. Somehow He saw it, by faith, as a transition time. And so we ask and wonder at times: which is the true song of Passion Week? The PRELUDE or the GRAND FINALE?

Which way do we set the music on the stand? Do the notes GO UP and LIFT US in graceful cheering, or do they GO DOWN and plant our feet in the cancerous crowds outside of Pilate's breakfast nook.

Actually, Jesus seems to think that both songs are out of place for on Palm Sunday, as the crowds cheer, He weeps. And on Good Friday, as the mob shouts for His demise, He remains silent. Why? Because, for Him, this is neither prelude time nor finale time. Instead, think of it as a modulation movement, as transition time, from one key signature to the next. A measure... a moment, perhaps when the same old song takes on new meaning, a new significance.

The song that Jesus sings is the message of paradox...that no one truly lives without first dying to self...that no one ever finds life without first losing it...that no grain of wheat begins to grow without first being thrown into the earth to rot. And the Song that He sings is neither the beginning of the Kingdom nor the ending of His own life. Neither Prelude nor Finale. It is the music of transition and nothing would ever be the same again!

THE MUSIC OF THIS PASSION WEEK THEN BECOMES A MESSAGE OF HOPE

And so the music of this

Passion week carries with it the melody or message of hope. It is there...very much a part of it.

Maurice Boyd of the City Church once preached a sermon that he called, The Wrong Side of Easter. In it, he said this....and I like it...

"It's hard for us to truly celebrate either Palm Sunday or Good Friday...for we're EASTER PEOPLE...people of the Resurrection. And the songs of this week come back to us like familiar memories. But we can't live them again. God has put us in a new time frame. Both Palm Sunday Prelude and Good Friday Finale must eventually fade away to the new Song of Easter. Neither the shouts of the children in the streets nor the cries of the crowd at Pilate's bench will satisfy our thirst for meaning in life".

As often as possible, you and I need to sing that melody of hope which finds profound meaning in the events of this Passion Week. Each person present needs to find and to sing that melody for himself or herself. And maybe... maybe that's what Isaac Watts had in mind back there 9n 1707 when he penned a new song. It was a song for a Passion Week Communion Service. It's our closing hymn today and here's the interesting thing, it was the first church hymn, I'M told, to use the pronound "I". It took the singer on a tour of the events of Passion Week. And then it did one more thing. It put words of a new outlook in his mind forming the melody of a new theme in his mouth. It's as though the neither the Prelude nor the Finale was enough to capture the meaning of the momentous events of the week before us. Said and sang Watts:

"When I survey the wondrous Cross, On which the  
Prince of Glory died,  
My richest gain I count but loss, and pour  
contempt on all my pride.  
Were the whole realm of nature mind, That were a  
present far too small,  
Love so amazing, so Divine, Demands my soul, my life,  
my all!"

PRAYER

Make us sensitive once again, O God, to Your nearness and to Your presence among us on this Palm Sunday...remembering that this same royal person who rode into ancient Jerusalem still goes on before us even today -

Probing our consciences,  
Challenging our hopes,  
Haunting our dreams,  
Stimulating our spirits...

Wrestle with us, Lord, in those hidden corners of our hearts, our lives where indecision and hesitancy and doubt are so often lurking. Accept our praises and the hosannas we bring on this special day. Help us to follow in His steps, more ready to serve than to be served. All this we now ask in the name and spirit of Jesus in Whom we have come to see life's highest hopes as well as to experience in deepest meaning. Amen.

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Challenging our hopes,  
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Wrestle with us, Lord, in those hidden corners of our hearts, our lives where indecision and hesitancy and doubt are so often lurking. Accept our praises and the hosannas we bring on this special day. Help us to follow in His steps, more ready to serve than to be served. All this we now ask in the name and spirit of Jesus in Whom we have come to see life's highest hopes as well as to experience in deepest meaning. Amen.