

"THE SALVATION ARMY PARADE"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York · 10028  
March 31, 1996

### INTRODUCTION

Churches celebrate Palm Sunday in different ways. At one church the people come together quite early in the morning in the basement of the church, and then when everyone is ready, they throw open the front doors of the church and proceed to march around the neighborhood. In this procession there are people waving palm branches, others playing musical instruments, including bagpipes, and still others shouting and singing "Hosanna". And last year they even had a donkey in the parade. This Palm Sunday celebration has become an important tradition in the life of this New York City church.

But a couple of years ago while the pastor and his people were processing around the neighborhood, making a bit of a noise, a young man in a nearby apartment house threw open his window and shouted down to them,

"What's all the noise about? What's going on?"  
"You folks sound like the Salvation Army!" And with that he slammed down the window. Before he did, the pastor looked up and replied, "Son, we are the Salvation Army! Come on down and join us!"

He didn't come down, but when you stop to think about it....what better way to sum up the events of the first Palm Sunday than to call it a salvation army parade, for that's really what it was. Let's review it together...

### DEVELOPMENT

Jesus and His disciples stood at a vantage point overlooking the beautiful city of Jerusalem. As some of you may recall from trips to that city, Jerusalem can be seen from miles away in just about any direction. Jesus and the twelve were coming in from Bethany. And the city seemed so peaceful that morning and from that vantage point, Jesus realized that the end of His earthly ministry was approaching. He had a pretty good idea what would happen once He set foot in the city. "The hour has come" is what He said to His followers.

Remember how He instructed two of His disciples to go into a nearby village where they would find a colt that had never been ridden. He told them,

"Untie it, and bring it. If someone should ask you why you are taking the colt, simply say to them that the Lord has need of it."

And with that assurance, the two disciples set out in search of a colt and imagine their surprise when they found the colt...just as Jesus had told them. And sure enough as they were taking it away, someone did ask them, "What are you doing....untying that colt?" They replied even as Jesus had instructed them and were allowed to continue without any further questions.

### HIGH HOPES OF HIS FOLLOWERS

One thing to notice here in this Palm Sunday scenes would be the high hopes of His followers. No sooner had the two disciples returned with the colt than a crowd began to form. And this crowd was in the mood for a bit of a celebration. Excitement was in the air. Some spread their garments on the road while others took leafy branches from the trees that lined that rocky path. There was singing and shouting and the waving of branches. It was a joyous and happy scene.

The people were ready for a change. They were looking for someone to lead them to a better life and they had high hopes that Jesus would be that "Someone". And there is something appealing about people with high hopes and with some great expectations.

Six year old Tommy Tighe asked a business man for a loan of five hundred dollars. Believe it or not, but the man said "yes" to six year old, Tommy, but explained to Tommy that he would have to pay it back with a bit of interest. Tommy understood all of that....but he had a plan. As a matter of fact from the age of four, Tommy had had a dream. He wanted to make a bumper sticker that said,

"PEACE, PLEASE. DO IT FOR US KIDS, PLEASE!"  
(Signed, TOMMY)

Tommy needed the money to print 1,000 bumper stickers and he was convinced that he could make a difference.

He listened to some tapes with suggestions for selling. "Start selling at the top" is what he heard on one tape and that was exactly where he began. He convinced his dad to drive him up to former President Reagan's home and without a moment's hesitation, Tommy rang the bell and soon the gatekeeper came out. Tommy gave the gatekeeper a very impressive two minute sales presentation on his bumper sticker. The gatekeeper reached into his pocket and gave Tommy two dollars and said,

"Here, I want one of those. Hold on and I'll get the former president and see if he would like to buy one from you."

He did and later on the Orange County Register did a feature story on Tommy. The reporter who wrote up this story asked him what he thought his impact would be on world peace and Tommy replied,

"I don't think I'm old enough yet. I think you have to be eight, or nine years of age to stop all the wars in the world!"

You know...as a result of the newspaper article, young six year old Tommy ended up on national television and who knows? Maybe Tommy's effort has brought the world a bit closer to peace. I would like to believe that God has a special fondness for people like Tommy Tighe....for people who are "believers"....for people who go through life with "high hopes and with great expectations" and who long to see the world become a better place. God has a special fondness, I'm sure, for such people and they were there on that first Palm Sunday morning. Hope is having faith in the future. And they had high hopes for Jesus....

#### THEIR HOPES WERE SHORT-SIGHTED

But there was a problem, a problem that stemmed from the fact that their high hopes were somewhat short-sighted. They could not see the world from God's perspective. God had a greater plan...a far grander plan than they could ever imagine.

When the people along the road saw Jesus riding a colt approaching their beloved city of Jerusalem, they immediately thought that Jesus would enter the city defiantly to smash the existing and established order. They thought that this was "show-down" time between Jesus and the Roman officials. This was what they wanted and this was what they were hoping for. They were all "geared up".

"Hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord" rang out everywhere.

This word "Hosanna" could also be translated as "save us now." Yet the action of Jesus was just the opposite of what the people were expecting. He was riding a colt, the symbol of peace - not a white horse, the symbol of the conquering hero. Jesus approached Jerusalem in peace as a humble servant and not as a mighty warrior King. And the people were so preoccupied with the notion of political and economic power that they were blind to what was taking place right here before their very eyes. God was at work, but not in a way that they could see Him.

And that's a bit of a reminder to us. So often God is at work even when we can't see Him.

We all have marvelled at the changes that have taken place in the former Soviet Union. One of the Soviet "bloc" countries that was liberated during the upheaval was Estonia. A Reverend Olaf Parnaments was a church administrator in Estonia during the time when people risked their livelihood to live and to proclaim their Christian faith.

Several invitations were extended to this clergyman, Olaf Parnaments, by Christians in this country to come here to speak and to share and to tell first-hand of his experiences, but the result was always the same: his government was refusing to grant him permission to come this way. But then in desperation, one group was advised to try what was called the "Kitchen Door Technique". They would invite him personally, and not officially. And it worked! Olaf finally arrived here in the States. "It is a miracle" he told his welcoming hosts as they greeted each other and hugged each other at Kennedy Airport.

Olaf was very nervous at his first speaking engagement. He had never spoken in English at a public meeting. There was a long and awkward pause while he searched for a particular verse of scripture. He began by reading from the 45th chapter of Isaiah.

"Thus says the Lord to His anointed, to Cyrus...."I will go before you and level the mountains and I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut through the bars of iron."  
(Isaiah 45, 1 and 2)

There was a long pause and then Olaf looked up and said,

"And sometimes those iron bars are called the 'Iron Curtain'"

It was an electrifying moment recalls someone who was present. The people who were there experienced the active presence of the Living God. Yes, God is at work even when we are not aware of it.

The people on that first Palm Sunday were looking for a conquering King. And Jesus appreciated the high hopes and the great expectations of those who lined the path and cheered Him on, but He knew deep in His heart of hearts that God's plan for His life was different and that those high hopes were short-sighted. God had a different plan, a plan that would change the world forever and this leads me on to the final point of this Palm Sunday message.

EASY TO SHOUT BUT HARD TO SERVE

And that is that it is easy to shout,  
but hard to serve....much harder to serve.

Remember that bumper sticker of a few years back? How did it go? "Honk if you love Jesus". Remember it? But have you seen the follow up? I haven't but they say it is: "Tithe if you love Jesus. Anyone can honk!" And there's truth in that. Think of it this way. Everyone loves a parade. Everyone loves to get excited. Sometimes, we, too, get caught up in the excitement of the moment. We are filled with enthusiasm, with a fresh burst of enthusiasm over a new face or a new project. But unfortunately our enthusiasm soon fades and we lose interest. Oh...it was great while it lasted, but now it's gone. Yes, it's easy to shout but it's tougher to stay and serve. Many would rather shout than serve. I've seen it happen here...but thank God for those who "stay with it."

But remember that He came to serve and not to be served. It's there in the Scripture...in the 20th chapter of Matthew's Gospel.

The story is told of a new student over here at Union Seminary who arrived in a taxi with his suitcases, there at 120th Street and Broadway. Noticing a white haired man in shirt sleeves standing by the door of the Seminary, the student called over to him with a slight touch of arrogance in his voice.

"Hey, mister....do you work here?" And upon hearing "yes" that he did, he then called to him....and commanded "Then you may take my bags up to Room 309."

The older man silently picked up two heavy suitcases and trudged up three flights of stairs to Room 309. The student followed, holding only his brief case and a light raincoat. When the door was opened, the new student casually flipped the person who had carried his suitcases up three flights a small coin. The gentleman with the white hair politely thanked the young man, but declined the tip.

The following day, the newly arrived student joined the rest of the seminary community at the opening communion service. He was horrified to see that the man he had assumed was the seminary porter was "up front" wearing a pulpit robe and presiding over the worship. When he whispered a question to his neighbor sitting next to him, the young student learned that this white-haired gentleman was the president of the Seminary, the illustrious Dr. Henry Sleane Coffin. Following the service, the student rushed up to the President and began to stammer apologies for so brusquely commanding Dr. Coffin to carry his bags. The great scholar-pastor-teacher allowed himself a small smile and then gently answered:

"The Son of Man came not to be served, but  
to serve.....and we must learn to do likewise".

The young ministerial student said it was the most important lesson that he learned in his three years at seminary.

Friend, it's easy to shout. It's hard to serve...anyone can honk!

CLOSING

The people who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday failed to realize that God, in a way, was offering them an opportunity to join Him in doing a new thing. Rather than simply smashing the oppressive government of that day, God was beginning from the bottom to build a new world order. He was starting with a small group of men and women, a rag-tag "salvation army" to be sure....but one that would grow and grow person by person across the centuries until it transcended all governments of this world.

That rag-tag army now numbers in the millions and the wonderful thing it is still growing....people are still joining that parade...as it builds hospitals and schools and universities...healing the wounded and giving captive people their liberty...bringing people from darkness into light.

Are you a part of that "salvation army" parade...marching with Him. He's at the head of it and wants you there. He continue to lead us.... haunting our dreams and challenging our hopes, probing our consciences and stimulating our spirits.....yes, this Jesus of Nazareth in whom you and I have come to see life's highest hope and its deepest meaning. To join that parade or not. The choice is yours, for as Lowell has put it in his poem which is our closing 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."

PRAYER

Help each of us, O God, to follow in His steps....more ready always to serve than to be served. Wrestle with us, Lord, in the hidden corners of our lives where indecision and hesitancy and doubt are at work. Touch us and move us in these moments, confirming within us the intentions and decisions that may be surfacing there below the surface of our lives. We would ask this now, in recognition of all of our divided loyalties. Accept our praises and the hosannas that we bring. In His spirit we pray. Amen.

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