

THE WAY OF JESUS  
"IV. In Failure"

INTRODUCTION

On several of the Sunday mornings in Lent this year, we have considered the way of Jesus in facing certain life situations. His way should be our way. Today we turn to consider His way in facing failure.

The events of Palm Sunday provide us with a starting point. We tend to look upon Palm Sunday as a day of great joy. The traditional symbols are singing children and the waving of palm branches. We speak of a triumphal entry and of a royal welcome. Yet, when all is said and done, there is a deep sadness underlying Palm Sunday. It is a sadness of something good, something glorious being rejected and refused by the city. For many in Jerusalem, it was a day of frustration and confusion. As that wonderful day came to a close, there were those who were already planning and plotting how to get rid of this man from upstate who had come into their city riding on a donkey.

As the shadows of the evening began to fall over Jerusalem that day, the Son of Man was already feeling the loneliness of despair and a growing sense of failure.  
of rejection

REJECTION BY THE LEADERS

He could sense what was happening. I think He knew that the leaders of the people were not ready to accept Him. They refused to make the necessary changes that He was asking them to make. ~~His ideas were not being accepted.~~ Jesus had left the serenity and the safety of Galilee to come to Jerusalem in a dangerous and final bid for acceptance. This was the religious heart of the nation; if anyone wished to speak to the nation, this was the place to do it.

He entered the Holy City - not on a war charger, but riding, if you will, on a donkey. He was a man of peace, a man of deep humility. The Kingdom He was offering to His nation was not based upon violence or power or narrow nationalism, but rather it was a Kingdom that would evolve out of deeds of love and of mercy. An awful lot would have to be changed from top to bottom if they were to follow Him and what He was asking. His rejection is summed up in these lines:

"They pluck their palm branches and hail Him as King,  
early on Sunday.  
They spread out their garments; hosannas they sing,  
early on Sunday.  
But where is the noise of their hurrying feet,  
The crown they would offer, the sceptre, the seat?  
Their King wanders hungry, forgot in the street,  
early on Monday".

REJECTION BY HIS FOLLOWERS

Then, too, we find that His followers began to drift away and many rejected the meaning and the terms of discipleship. Oh, how their hearts must have soared on Palm Sunday as He came His way into the city. At long last, success was close at hand. Those many months of following Him in Galilee were now to be crowned with triumph. And then how their hearts must have sank as they began to sense that this was not to be the case. Their dismay, ~~their frustration,~~ their opposition must have hurt Him deeply when He tried to let them see that He was not coming to Jerusalem as a conquering hero.

We think of Judas. We've been brought up to regard him as a greedy, selfish and treacherous man. But I wonder if it might not be more in keeping with the

New Testament account to regard him as a man who had dedicated his life to a great cause and then suddenly became terribly disillusioned. ~~Some sympathetic interpretations of Judas have looked upon his actions as an effort to precipitate a crisis and force Jesus into a kingly declaration.~~ Some of you may remember, as I do, that old version of DeMille's "King of Kings" and how Judas comes up to Jesus as He stands there on the temple steps with the crowd cheering Him and Judas steps forth with a crown with the insistent plea that He place the crown on the head of Jesus.

Or take Peter, ~~Peter has often been~~ criticized for his falling away from Jesus in the final hours when he denied Him. The mind of Peter, you see, was unable to connect Messiahship with suffering and sacrifice and death. He would gladly have given his life for a fighting Messiah. Remember how Peter took the sword in the Gethsemane scene when the soldiers came to arrest Him...only to be rebuked by His Lord. Why should we expect Peter to have the faith to remain loyal to Christ when they were in Pilate's courtyard. Only fools, we might be tempted to say, have courage for lost causes and in the eyes of the disciples, it was looking more and more like a lost cause. The ship was sinking and they were getting ready to jump. After all, they were human.

And I suppose there is a sense in which one can say that Jesus had failed. He had failed to help them to understand fully the nature of His mission. One of the most wistful, heart-rending lines in the Passion account is this line spoken by Jesus as He looked out over the city of Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives that Sunday evening after His triumphal entry:

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem: killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you. How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but ye would not."

And so we see and sense that underlying the joy and enthusiasm of Palm Sunday was this profound sadness. The leaders were not ready to accept what He had to offer. The disciples and many of His followers did not fully understand the deep meaning of those "discipleship sayings". And the events of that day brought these failures into fighting focus. Before that day ended, the tangled and the twisted emotions of people began to set in motion some actions which culminated in the events of Good Friday.

#### JESUS AND FAILURE

Here in this Palm Sunday "mirror", we begin to sense that Jesus takes His place with us in experiencing the loneliness of despair and the deep frustration of failure. It may be the dismay of ruptured relationships, the sharpness of misunderstandings, the loneliness brought about by separation from loved ones, the despair and disappointment of having tried so hard, but fallen short. As our private dreams and hopes have been shattered, whom among us has not walked this same road.

Those of us who preach in pulpits or give of ourselves in service in places like the church or the community - leading, teaching, serving - know the spiritual agony brought about by sheer indifference to hard and honest effort. In spite of our efforts, so many continue to place a premium on lust, not love; on property, not people. We speak of the life of faith and the nature of spiritual values, but society seems determined to exalt the symbols of status and prestige.

Yet, even in the shadows of failure, we find that growth can and does occur. ~~Let's take a few moments to consider how.~~

HUMBLES US For one thing, failure has a humbling effect on us; ~~we call it a sobering experience.~~ It can nudge us toward some helpful self-examination. Its anguish can bring a sort of cleansing, humbling encounter with God that gives impetus to renewal and growth. I'm reminded of a remark made by a layman of this Church some time back - a successful business man - who encountered serious reverses in his work. Quietly he observed, "You know....maybe it was for the best. It taught me a number of things. I was getting away from God...getting careless...and it helped to bring Him back into my life".

Yes, failure can teach us a greater dependence upon an eternal source of strength. One of the Saints of the Church used to pray, "Lord, guard me against a departing heart". The heart of man naturally inclines from and departs from God - especially when all is going well. Failure is one of those curious instruments used by God to bring us back.

TEACHES US As failure humbles us, so it teaches us. There are lessons to be learned in the shadows of failure. Seward Hiltner has written a helpful book on the subject of self-understanding. In one of the early chapters, he offers the reader this insight:

"As adults, we tend not to notice a lack of emotional perspective until something goes wrong. Then we feel caught in a box. Actually one end of the box is open. A new perspective is possible".

When something goes wrong, we begin to look for a new answer. Defeat and frustration set up tensions. On the one hand, tensions can be debilitating. Or they may, on the other hand, spur us to new effort and compel us to dig deeper, to use creative imagination to seek another way.

Lincoln was a man who many times in his life experienced the heartbreak of failure. Early in life he began to permit each experience to teach him...to deepen him...to help him try again, perhaps in a different way. For years I've kept this little card tacked to my study bulletin board. Entitled, "Are You Discouraged?", its message is helpful and more than once spoken to my needs.

DEEPENS US As failure tends to humble us, teach us, so it deepens us. It forces us to turn to the spiritual resources of life. Failure and victory, taken together, become the essence of life. They deepen us until we live from a great depth of being.

Bonhoeffer, writing from a prison cell during World War II, stated that mankind has "come of age". As I understand it, this little phrase means that the modern world as a whole experiences little need of the information or the strength which traditional religion has always claimed to supply. The modern, contemporary world rejoices in its scientific achievements, its intellectual freedom, its new morality. It does not appear to be deeply interested in the "transcendent", in the question of God, in the claims of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

However, I believe that all of the developing sciences of man cannot give us the ultimate answers when we are confronted not only by our inner failures, but also by our deep and devastating moral defeats. We yearn for spiritual dimensions, for ultimate answers, for absolutes that hold things together. I often have the feeling that most of our best qualities, our deepest wisdom, our greatest

insights are born out of the anguish of suffering, adversity and defeat. Failure - as a form of crisis - can be the very spur by which God deepens us and lifts us and makes us a greater blessing to others.

Paul, the Apostle, had a weakness which he referred to as "a thorn in the flesh". We do not know just what it was; our understanding is incomplete. But listen to these words:

"And to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh. A messenger of Satan to harass me...to keep me from being too elated. Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weakness, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

"For when I am weak - then I am strong". They're words of fire. Failure can deepen us, if only we will let it, until we know a power and a strength not our own that we never thought possible!

#### CLOSING

The humiliation of rejection. The heartbreak of failure. As the first Palm Sunday came to a close, Jesus of Nazareth began to experience both. However, before the week was half over, His inner life grew and deepened. As He faced the bitterness of betrayal, the disappointment of disloyalty, the brutality of the cross - somehow in the great mystery of it all, He triumphed. Man did not have the last word. Carry that thought with you along with the palm leaf as you depart.

Mingled with the underlying sadness of that day, there is still some of the joy of that first Palm Sunday - for the royal figure of Jesus mysteriously goes on before us. In spite of rejection after rejection across the centuries by nations and individuals, that man on the donkey still goes on before us - haunting our memories, challenging our hopes, probing our consciences, stimulating our spirits - and after all these years and all these failures on our part to accept what He has to give, He still makes the same offer.

If you are willing to submit to the rule of God, God will give you new life. But the rule of God is the rule of love in all our relationships. You cannot have the life unless you are willing to love. Will you accept that. Will you take the chance? That is the promise, that is the offer - and the decision. ..always 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 darekness and  
that light."

PRAYER Our prayer is a silent searching of our own life. Help us, O God, as we try to follow Jesus through the crowded streets of the city into the Temple area and then 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.

Above all, give us the will to put our trust in Him and pledge our loyalty to Him.

We ask this in recognition of all of our divided loyalties and our rejection of Him at so many points along the Way. O God, now accept our praises and hosannas and the spirit in which we offer them. In His name. Amen

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The events of Palm Sunday provide us with a starting point. We tend to look upon Palm Sunday as a day of great joy. The traditional symbols are singing children and the waving of beautiful palm branches. We speak of a triumphal entry and of a royal welcome. Yet, when all is said and done, there is a deep sadness underlying Palm Sunday. It is the sadness of something good, something glorious being rejected and refused by the city. For many in Jerusalem it was a day of frustration and confusion. As that day came to an end, there were those who were already planning and plotting how to get rid of this man from upstate who had come into their city riding on a donkey. As the shadows of the evening began to fall over Jerusalem that day, the Son of Man was already inwardly feeling the loneliness of despair and a growing sense of failure.

REJECTION BY THE LEADERS He knew what was happening. I think He knew that the leaders of the people were not ready to accept Him. He sensed they were rejecting His ideas. They refused to make the necessary changes that He was asking them to make. Jesus had left the serenity and safety of Galilee to come to Jerusalem in a dangerous and a final bid for acceptance. Jerusalem was the religious heart of the nation. If anyone wished to speak to the nation, that was the place to do it.

He entered the Holy City - not on a war charger, but riding on a donkey. He was a man of peace, a man of deep humility. And the kingdom He was offering to His nation was not based upon violence or military power or narrow nationalism, but rather it was a kingdom that would evolve out of deeds of love and mercy. If they were to follow His ways then everything would have to be changed from top to bottom. The following lines describe this rejection:

"They pluck their palm branches and hail Him as King,  
early on Sunday.  
They spread out their garments; hosannas they sing,  
early on Sunday.  
But where is the noise of their hurrying feet,  
The crown they would offer, the sceptre, the seat?  
Their King wanders hungry, forgot in the street,  
early on Monday".

REJECTION BY HIS FOLLOWERS Then, too, we find that His followers began to drift away and many rejected the meaning and the terms of discipleship. Oh, how their hearts must have been lifted on Palm Sunday as He made His way into the city in the midst of the cheering throng. At long last, success seemed close at hand. Those many months of following Him in Galilee now were to be crowned with triumph. And how their hearts must have sank when they began to sense that this was not to be the case. Their dismay, their frustration and even their opposition must have hurt Him deeply when He tried to let them see that He was not coming to Jerusalem as a conquering hero.

We think of Judas. We've been brought up to regard him as a greedy, selfish despicable traitor. But I wonder if it might not be more in keeping with the

New Testament account to regard him as a man who had dedicated his life to a great cause and then suddenly was pathetically disillusioned. Some sympathetic interpretations of Judas have looked upon his actions as an effort to precipitate a crisis and force Jesus into a kingly declaration. "Godspell" and "Superstar" both present sympathetic portrayals of Judas. And some of you may remember, as I do, the old version of DeMille's "King of Kings" and how Judas comes up to the person of Jesus as He stands there on the temple steps with the crowd cheering Him, and Judas steps forth with a crown with the insistent plea that he place the crown on the head of Jesus.

Or take Peter. Peter has often been criticized for his faithlessness and disloyalty to Jesus in the final hours when he denied Him. The mind of Peter was unable to connect Messiahship with suffering and death and sacrifice. He would gladly have been his life for a fighting Messiah. Peter did not shrink when the soldiers came to arrest Jesus in Gethsemane. Why should we expect Peter to have the faith not to deny Christ when they were in Pilate's courtyard. Only fools, we might be tempted to say, have courage for lost causes and in the eyes of the disciples, it was looking more and more like a lost cause! The ship was sinking and they were getting ready to jump; after all, they were human.

And I suppose that in one sense, Jesus had failed. He had failed to help them to understand fully the nature of His mission. One of the most wistful, heart-rending lines in the Scripture is this line spoken by Jesus as He looked out over the city of Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives hours after his entry into the city:

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem: killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you. How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but ye would not".

Underlying the joy and enthusiasm of Palm Sunday was this profound sadness. The leaders were not ready to accept what He had to offer. The disciples and many of His followers did not fully understand what discipleship really meant. And the events of the day brought these failures into frightening focus. And before that day was ended, the tangled and twisted emotions of people began to set in motion some actions which culminated in the events of Good Friday.

#### JESUS AND FAILURE

Here in this Palm Sunday mirror, we began to sense that Jesus takes His place with us in experiencing the loneliness of despair and the deep frustration of inner feelings of failure. Few present in this congregation this morning have not experienced similar feelings. It may be the dismay of ruptured relationships, the sharpness of misunderstanding, the loneliness brought about by separation from loved ones, the despair of having tried but fallen short. As cherished dreams and high hopes have been shattered, whom among us has not felt the pangs of failure.

Those of us who preach in pulpits or given of ourselves in service in the church - leading, teaching - know the spiritual agony brought about by sheer indifference to our hardest efforts. In spite of our efforts, so many continue to place a premium on lust, not love; on property, not people. We speak of the life of faith and the nature of spiritual values, but society seems determined to exalt the symbols of status and prestige and seems to ignore the other side of life.

Yet, even in the shadows of failure, we find that growth does occur. Let's take a few moments to consider how.

HUMBLES US For one thing, failure always humbles us. We can call it a sobering experience. It nudges us toward self-examination. And this can be good. Its anguish can bring a sort of cleansing, humbling encounter with God that gives impetus to renewal and growth. I'm reminded of a remark made by a layman of the church - a successful business man - who encountered some serious reverses in his work. He quietly observed, "You know....maybe it was for the best. It taught me a number of things. I was getting away from God and it helped to bring me back to Him".

Failure teaches a dependence upon an eternal source of strength. One of the saints of the church use to pray, "Lord, guard me against a departing heart". The heart of man naturally inclines from and departs from God, especially when all is going well. Failure is one of those curious instruments that God uses to bring us back.

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"As adults, we tend not to notice a lack of emotional perspective until something goes wrong. Then we feel caught in a box. Actually one end of the box is open. A new perspective is possible."

When something goes wrong, we begin to look for a new answer. Defeat and frustration set up tensions. On the one hand, tensions can be neurotic and debilitating. Or they may, on the other hands, spur us to new effort and compel us to dig deeper, to use creative imagination to seek another way.

Lincoln was a man who more than once experienced the heartbreak of failure. Early in life he began to permit each experience to teach him, to deepen him, to help him try again, perhaps in a different way. For years I have kept this little card taked to my study bulletin board. Entitled, "Are You Discouraged", its message is helpful and more than once it has spoken to my inner needs. Let me read it to you.

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Bonhoeffer, writing from a prison cell during World War II, stated that mankind has "come of age". This phrase, as I understand it, means that the modern world as a whole experiences little need of the information or the strength which traditional religion has always claimed to supply. The modern, contemporary world rejoices in its scientific achievement, its intellectual freedom, its new morality. It does not appear to be vitally interested in the transcendent, in the question of God and the claims of Christ.

I believe, however, that all of the developing sciences of man cannot give us the ultimate answers when we are confronted not only by our inner failures, but also by our deep and devastating moral defeats. Mechanistic concepts eventually reach a point of diminishing return and we yearn for the spiritual dimensions of life. We seek the ultimate answers. It is true, is it not, upon self-examination, that most of our best qualities, our deepest wisdom, our greatest attainments

have been born out of the anguish of adversity and defeat? Failure, as a form of crisis, can be the spur by which God deepens us and makes us more of a blessing to others.

Paul, the Apostle, had a weakness which he referred to as "a thorn in the flesh". We do not know just what it was. Our understanding is incomplete. But listen to these words,

"And to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh. A messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness' For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weakness, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

"For when I am weak, then I am strong". Words of fire. Failure can deepen us, if only we will let it, until we know a power and a strength that we did not think possible.

CLOSING      The humiliation of rejection. The heartbreak of failure. Our Lord began to experience these as the shadows fell over the city on Palm Sunday. Near the end of the day he slipped through the city gates and made His way a short distance to Bethany. But, before that week was over, He had grown inwardly - and as He faced the bitterness of betrayal, the agony of Gethsemane, the disappointment of disloyalty, the brutality of the cross - somehow in the great mystery of it all, He triumphed. Man did not have the last word.

Carry that thought with you along with the palm leaf as you leave this place.

PRAYER

As we try to follow our Lord and Master into the city where He was hailed as King, help us, O God, to show forth in our lives something of his incomparable spirit, something of His great way, that people seeing us may be renewed in confidence, and courage and know that once again Thou hast triumphed. Amen