

THE WAY OF JESUS
"IV. In Rejection"

INTRODUCTION On several of the Sunday mornings in Lent this year, we have been considering the way of Jesus in dealing with people and in facing certain life situations. His way should be our way. Today, we turn to consider His way in facing feelings of rejection and possible 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 royal welcome, a triumphal entry, a parade. Everyone loves a parade. 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, refused, turned down by the city.

For many in Jerusalem it was a day of confusion and frustration. As that wonderful day came to an end, there were those who were already planning and plotting how to get rid of this man from upstate Galilee who had come into their city riding on a donkey. As the shadows of the evening began to fall over Jerusalem late that day, the Son of Man was already beginning to feel the loneliness of despair and rejection and failure. (upsetting the status quo)

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

He entered the Holy City of His fathers - not a war charger, but riding on a donkey. He was a man of peace, a man of deep humility. This 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 accept Him and follow His ways so much would have to be changed. 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. Behind the closed doors of their *Pause* lives they began to reject 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. 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 this was not to be the case.

We think of Judas. Most of us have been brought up to regard him as a selfish,

greedy, despicable traitor. At times I've wondered 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 deeply 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 seem to lean toward 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 Jesus as He stands there on the temple steps on Palm Sunday afternoon, the crowd cheering Him for having driven the money changers out of the Temple, and Judas steps forth with a crown with the insistent plea that Jesus allow him to place that crown on His head.

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. He would gladly have given his life's blood for a fighting Messiah, and we remember how he took the sword when the soldiers came to take Jesus away. But now....why should we expect Peter to have the faith not to deny Christ when they were in Pilate's courtyard. Only fools, we might 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, some might suggest Jesus had failed. He had failed to help them fully understand the nature of His mission. To me, one of the most wistful, heart-rending lines in the Passion story is this line spoken by Jesus as late on Palm Sunday He looked out over the city of Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives:

"O Jerusalem, 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 surface joy and enthusiasm of Palm Sunday was this deep sadness. The leaders were not ready to accept what He had to offer. The disciples and many who followed Him in Galilee did not fully understand the terms and cost of discipleship. And the events of this day brought these failures on the part of people into frightening focus. Before that day was ended, the tangled and twisted emotions of people began to put in motion some actions which culminated several days later in a place called Calvary outside a city wall.

JESUS AND REJECTION Here in this Palm Sunday mirror, we began to see certain things. We sense that Jesus takes His place with us in experiencing the loneliness of despair brought about by rejection or the feeling that in spite of our best efforts, we have somehow failed. It may be the dismay of ruptured relationships, the sharpness of misunderstanding, the discouragement of having tried but fallen short. As our cherished dreams and high hopes have been torn asunder, shattered, who among us has not felt the pangs of failure.

Those of us who preach in pulpits or give of ourselves in service to others in the church or wherever it may be - leading, teaching, ministering - know the spiritual anguish brought about by indifference to our efforts. In spite of what we say and do, so many continue to bypass us - placing a premium on lust, not love; on property, not people. We speak of the life of faith and of spiritual values, but so many seem determined to exalt the symbols of status and prestige. The other side of life seems to be ignored.

HUMBLES US

Yet, even in the shadows, we find that growth can and does occur.

For one thing, rejection and failure humbles us. Call it if you will, a sobering experience. It nudges us toward self-examination. This can be good. Its anguish can bring a sort of cleansing, humbling encounter with God that gives impetus to renewal and growth. ~~A layman of the church who encountered some serious reverses in his work was heard to remark quietly, "You know... maybe it was for the best. It humbled me. I was pretty successful, and I was getting away from God. It helped to bring me back to Him".~~

Failure and rejection teach 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. Rejection is one of those curious instruments that God uses to bring us to our knees.

TEACHES US

As it humbles us to our knees, so, too, it teaches us. There are lessons to be learned in the shadows of failure. Seward Hiltner in writing about self-understanding, offers this helpful observation:

"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. Remember: a new perspective is possible".

How true. When something goes wrong, then we begin to look for a new answer. Defeat and frustration do set up tensions. There's no getting away from that. On the one hand, tensions can be debilitating and neurotic. Or they may, on the other hand, spur us to new effort, compel us to dig deeper, to use creative imagination to seek another course. "One end of the box is open". "A new perspective is possible". Remember that when you're feeling trapped.

Abraham Lincoln was a man who more than once was driven to his knees by the heartbreak of rejection and the accompanying feelings of failure. As one studies his life, one gets the impression that "Honest Abe" early in life learned how to grow in those crisis experiences. Each time he tried again, perhaps in a different way. For years I have kept this little card tacked to my bulletin board in my study. Entitled, "Are You Discouraged", its message is helpful. I'm reluctant to help you how many times I've read the message on this card over the years as I've struggled with problems in my work.

DEEPENS US

Can we not also say that as failure humbles, teaches us, so, too, it deepens us. Somehow it does force us to turn to the spiritual resources of life. Failure and victory, taken together, become the very essence of life. They deepen us until we live from a great depth of being and perspective.

It was Bonhoeffer, writing from a prison cell in Germany during the early 1940s, who first said that mankind has "come of age". By that he was implying that the modern world as a whole experiences little need of the information or 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 concerned with the transcendent, in the question of God, with 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 by our inner failures and our

moral defeats. Mechanistic concepts eventually reach a point of diminishing return and we yearn for the spiritual dimension that will set us free. So often in life, it is the anguish of adversity that gives birth to our highest wisdom and best qualities. Failure, as a form of crisis, can be the spur by which God deepens us and makes us more of a blessing to others.

Remember that Paul, the Apostle, wrote of a weakness he had. He called it "a thorn in the flesh". We do not know what it was, but listen to something he once penned regarding it.

"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, rejections, 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, I am convinced, 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 and the heartbreak of failure. As the day we call Palm Sunday came to a close, our Lord began to experience these. 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!

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 individuals and nations, that man on the donkey still goes on before us--haunting our memories, challenging our hopes, probing our consciences, stimulating our spirits. After all these years and all the failures on our part to accept what He has to give, He still makes the 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, the offer - and the decision, 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 darkness 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 ways of the city into the

Temple, 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 in so many days of our lives. O God, now accept our praises and hosannas and the spirit in which we offer them. In His name. Amen