

"WOULD THAT WE KNEW THE THINGS OF PEACE"

INTRODUCTION

Jesus "came to town" not in a sleek, black limousine, but on a borrowed donkey. There was no ticker-tape, just palm branches. He had no press agents, no handbills, no advance men making arrangements for his coming. There were only some rumours circulating among the faithful making their way to Jerusalem, rumours riding upon the expectations of a colonial people.

He rode into a Jerusalem readying itself to celebrate the Passover, and as Luke tells the story it was clearly an exciting moment for the disciples, for the pilgrims, and for the residents of the city. Messianic hopes of centuries were exploding, and the masses were willing to give anything or anybody a try. And certainly Jesus was as good as any who had shown his colors up to that time.

Writes Paul Scherer:

"Thus there was an abandon about the whole procession that left its neat and careful calculations at home in the ledger, snatched off its coat, threw its hat in the air and tossed on the road any token of devotion it could lay its hands on".

Luke implies that it was a reception almost as uninhibited and joyful as that which this city gave the Mets last October after they defeated the Orioles in the World Series. It was, indeed, a triumphal entry and we do well to sing with fervor "All Glory Laud and Honor" to commemorate that first Palm Sunday.

OR DO WE? Or do we? Could it possibly be that Palm Sunday misses the point? Could it be that this triumphal entry signals something of a misunderstanding on the part of the people, and disappointment on the part of Jesus?

It had happened before. Remember? Remember the time when James and John said to Jesus, "Jesus, when you are the King may we sit at your right hand and at your left hand?" "Gentlemen" replied Jesus, "How blind can you be? Those who sit with me sit at the foot of the table". Or again, at Caesarea Philippi, "Who do you say that I am?" asked Jesus of his disciples, and Peter replied, "Thou art the Christ". "Yes" said Jesus. "And I will have to go to Jerusalem, and there be man-handled by the chief-priests and the elders and be put to death". "Oh, No!" said Peter. "Oh, no - not you Jesus. To be executed is no way for a Christ to end up". "Out of my way, you devil" replied Jesus, "for you continue to misunderstand me, and to think of my mission as you would and not as God would have it".

And in a way, Palm Sunday was no different, for there was painful misunderstanding here, too. Throughout his ministry our Lord had apparently cared little for notoriety. He had cautioned his followers against false illusions and commanded on more than one occasion that someone to whom he had brought new life be quiet about it. He had steadfastly rejected the kind of Messiahship offered from so many different quarters. He would not be the social radical, the military giant, or the religious genius and seer that others demanded of him.

People would not allow him to be who He was. And the illusions on that Palm Sunday persisted because of it. There is little question that by Friday, Jesus was one of the great disillusionments of history. One has only to look at the difference in one week - for by then the cheering had stopped, mouths were closed in sneers, denial or sullen resentment. By Friday the illusions had been dispelled.

WHY DID THE CHEERING STOP

Why did the cheering stop? If we look carefully at those days between Sunday and Friday we will find the reasons the cheering stopped. We will see something about Jesus which so many of us tend to pass over during the days of Holy Week. I think that for the most part, our religious traditions surrounding these next few days magnify the innocence of Jesus. They present him as a victim. They show him weak, suffering, and passive. But this - this is only part of the picture, part of the truth.

We need to remember that it was during Holy Week that he cleansed the Temple. There's nothing weak or passive about him in this scene. It was the first thing he did when he got to town. Nothing could have been more nearly calculated to stir the reaction of those in power than our Lord's assault on their private domain. "Scripture says this is to be a house of prayer and you have made it into a den of thieves...of robbers" he cried, "and he began to drive them out".

We have here in this scene some overtones of the "politics of confrontation" - to use the vernacular of our time. I would suspect that on this point his demands came down more on the side of the "non-negotiable" than the "negotiable". There was no sitting down with the prelates to discuss this matter, no setting up of a committee to explore how the machinery of the Temple might change in some orderly fashion. One sees nothing of the "let us reason together" approach. His was not the voice of compromise and consensus in this scene. This was rage being directed at a corrupt power center of his day. One sees little respect for the property of others in this temple tantrum. This troubles us. ~~What do we make of it.~~ It reminds us, at some points, of the methods used by those who are part of New Left.

Indeed, much of the unrest of our time seems to be almost this page torn right out of the New Testament. Listen to what it has been saying to the universities. "This is to be a place of learning, but you have turned it into a tool of the defense establishment". Or to the nation, "Yours was to have been a land of freedom and of justice for all, but you have made it one of racial ghettos, creeping imperialism, nuclear over-kill". Or to the church, "This was to be the place for the service and the worship of the living God, but you have made it a museum for relics, a forum for the spouting of out-dated ideologies, and ~~practice of medieval ritual,~~ a fortress of the status quo."

If the message of the temple incident is not clear, we need only look at the parables of our Lord during the Passion week. I think we have here some of the most cutting, divisive and troublesome words that he probably spoke during his entire ministry. Throughout the days of that week he hammered home his point.

On one occasion, he made it clear to some stuffy religious people - the pillars of society - that whores and tax collectors and dope-pushers would get to heaven before they did. On another occasion during this week he reminded them that every time they had a chance to serve God in a sacrificial and adventurous manner, they had rationalized the opportunity away and destroyed the person who had called them into this new kind of service. Still another point during the same week, he condemned those bitterly with talents, gifts and resources who lacked the courage and imagination to put them to work in good fashion. And again, he coldly indicted those of the classes who thought of their privileges as vested interest rather than an opportunity for service and as far as he was concerned they were useless and could rot in hell.

This, let's admit it, is language hardly calculated to win friends or a long life. It's difficult to face up to. And those of us who believe that the themes

of this Passion week are passive, and weak should tackle them again in the days of this coming week, or perhaps we should let them tackle us again. Matthew - chapters 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, and 26.

At this point, Jesus was offensive and aggressive. He was intolerant, brutal, scathing, clearly seditious. This was no soft touch, no meek and mild "milquetoast". This was a man with a tough mind and a rough tongue and if he had just "cooled" it during that last week in Jerusalem, there is a good chance that he would never had gone to the cross at all.

Why did the cheering stop? I suppose it was because Jesus "told it like it is" - and for many the cross couldn't come soon enough.

ANOTHER REASON But another, and perhaps a deeper reason why the cheering stopped lies in our Lord's understanding of what makes for peace among men.

Who can forget that tearful lament over the city, "Would that you knew the things that make for peace, but they are hidden from your eyes". And not withstanding what we have said about our Lord being hard on people, he was soft on people as well - so much so that he was willing to give his life for them. He was not going to lift a sword, organize an army, resort to physical violence; he did not plan to launch a political campaign, nor establish a church. or guerilla warfare;

The things of peace that he brought lay not so much in his being a triumphant conqueror, but rather a passionate lover. His was a victory over self, so that others might be what they could be. He suggested that peace was not so much a question of outward trapping, but of inner commitment. His clue to the things of peace lay in his serving Jerusalem rather than controlling it.

NEW YORK: OUR JERUSALEM Have you ever stopped to think that, as Christians, New York may be our Jerusalem? Have we passionately loved it, given ourselves to it? Most of us probably spend more time in fury at it than we do weeping over it. Some of us may hate this city more than we love it. Its crimes and taxes; its power struggles and ethnic conflicts; its strikes and its parades; its loneliness and seeming ungovernability make it a thing more to be despised than to be loved.

How we wish than someone could come and save it. I am persuaded that it will be the way of Christ that will save it; that our church - this body of Christ - is valuable in God's economy only so long as we love this city, serve it, are willing to sacrifice for it. Its very stones are crying out for those who will love it, care for it, heal it, nurture it. Its very stones plead for those who will serve it with all that they have; who are committed to a future for men in this place.

The foundations of this city beg for those who can not only read the problems of real estate, transportation, housing, finance, welfare and education - but those who can see strengths and opportunities, can cultivate morale and create visions. God is making an appeal to people who will love this city and act for it, who will celebrate the possibilities of the melting pot and devote themselves to making it a new creation.

CLOSING To me there is an infinite sadness about Palm Sunday. It is a strange kind of day in which sadness is mingled with joy. It's the deep sadness of something glorious and beautiful being rejected, refused. They were there -

on the very threshold of life, yet they refused to enter in. So near and yet so far. So wise and yet so foolish. And to increase to the sadness, that rejection has continued on down through the years. Person after person, nation after nation have not been willing to make the necessary changes in order to accept the rule of God which is the law of love.

And yet, mingled with the sadness of the day, there is still some of the joy of that first Palm Sunday - for the royal figure of Jesus still somehow mysteriously is before us. In spite of rejection after rejection, that man on the donkey still goes on before us - haunting our memories, challenging our hopes, stimulating our spirits, probing our consciences. After all these years and these failures on our part to accept what he has to give us, 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, and 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 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.

By the light of burning martyrs
Jesus' bleeding feet I track,
Toiling up new Calvaries ever
With the cross that turns not back;
New occasions teach new duties,
Time makes ancient good uncouth;
They must upward still and onward
Who would keep abreast of truth."

PRAYER 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; and above all, give us the will to put our trust in him and pledge our loyalty to him. Help us so to follow in his steps, more ready to serve than to be served, that we may lose our lives and find them in him. We ask this in recognition of all our divided loyalties. O God, accept our praises and hosannas in the spirit in which we offer them, Amen.



EASTER

March 20, 1970

Dear Friend of Park Avenue United Methodist Church,

We now enter into Holy Week - truly the most significant week of the Christian year. Together we must give priority to our spiritual concerns. Those striking words of the late Studdert Kennedy need to be taken to heart by all of us -

"When Jesus came to Golgotha they hanged Him on
a tree,
They drove great nails through hands and feet,
and made a Calvary;
They crowned Him with a crown of thorns,
red were His wounds and deep,
For those were crude and cruel days,
and human flesh was cheap.

When Jesus came to (New York) they simply
passed Him by,
They never hurt a hair of Him,
they only let Him die;
For men had grown more tender, and they would
not give pain,
They only just passed down the street,
and left Him in the rain".

Down through the centuries, the message of hope generated by the Resurrection of Jesus Christ has given great meaning and purpose to life in man's search for universal peace and brotherhood. Today, as we view the strife and unrest all around us, we are encouraged and sustained by the good news of Easter.

We shall commemorate the Last Supper of our Lord on Thursday night, March 26, at 8 P. M.. The church will be open on Good Friday for private meditation. Our Easter Day service will be held at 11 A. M..

Each year our church receives an Easter offering which helps to make possible services and benefits for others through the church. We enclose an envelope for your gift. We appreciate your response.

May this be a joyous Easter for you and yours.

Sincerely,