

Palm/Passion Sunday. April 5, 2020.

Holy Week always takes us through the whole gamut of human emotion: from expectation to that almost out of body excitement of a mass rally, to anger, fear, shame, hope, joy, and always, always love. This Sunday of palms and Passion condenses much of this down into a container packed too tightly. The day never quite works, but I think that's okay. It's like a movie trailer for a film with a twist ending. It isn't really meant to stand on its own, but to entice us more deeply into the week itself.

This week we will, together though separated, go through Jesus' confrontations with religious authorities, his predictions of the end, the bittersweet love and tenderness of the last supper, his desperate prayers in the garden, the agony of Good Friday, the silence of Holy Saturday, and then assuredly the ecstatic joy of Easter. I'm quite sure that it will feel different from every other Holy Week and Easter. They are always imperfect, despite the frenzied preparations of the clergy and the careful attention of so many others who make them happen. This year, the imperfections will be different. But whatever those imperfections end up being, they cannot interfere with the truth of the story we have to tell: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. The resurrection has happened and happens whether we are gathered in church in our Easter dresses or not.

Today is a preview of most of it, cutting off before the joy at the end. And this crash course in holy week can go a long way in interpreting our lives today. Jesus rides into Jerusalem, knowing full well what will happen at the end. He's been telling his followers for several chapters that what we call Good Friday is coming. He knows that fear and anger and shame and pain are coming. And still the entry is a joyous, even a riotously joyous occasion. Still, in the coming days, he will take time to sit at table with his friends, to love them, to wash their feet and give them the new commandment to love as he has loved. Even knowing what is coming, he has a party, tells the truth, and loves.

We have been told that the worst days of this virus are still ahead of us, even as we already are tired and ragged and irritable. But even now, in our weariness and irritability, we find our days are laced with moments of joy and beauty. And as bad as things may get--even as bad as we may get--those moments of joy and fun and laughter and maybe even occasionally awe are right and good and to be cherished. Jesus knows that he's going to die; and he still starts the week off with a party. And then through the week he keeps on telling the truth and loving the people God has given him to love. We can do the same. No tragedy or fear or dread reduces the power of truth and love.

Jesus rides into Jerusalem and the rag-tag crowd greets him as king and Messiah. I'm sure that this meant a lot of different things to different members of that rabble. Religious agreement wasn't much more common then than it is now. But we can guess that some of them hoped he was coming to overthrow the empire, to reform religion, to renew the Davidic line of kings, to restore Israel's role as a power in the region. Those dreams of restoring some imagined glory of yesterday are always one of our strongest temptations. Whatever expectations were there on the

road into Jerusalem, not even his closest followers seemed yet to understand that he was coming to love, to tell the truth, and to pass through death. Jesus indeed comes to cast down and raise up, to liberate and to save, but he won't do it in the way that anyone expects.

We are longing for salvation, for liberation, for healing, whether it's literally from covid-19 or from the confinement of our homes or the damage our frazzledness is causing to our relationships or just from the existential dread that comes from having nothing to do but watch the bad news. I'm sure that we have strong preferences for what it might mean to be saved from all these things. Jesus will save us and is saving us, but that salvation probably won't have much to do with our preferences. It might have a lot to do with what Jesus has already done in Holy Week: telling the truth, loving fiercely and tenderly in every circumstance, and bringing new life even out of death. Our salvation might have a lot to do with God *enabling us* to tell the truth and to love, to nurture the life that God brings forth out of the grave.

Friends, there's a whole lot that isn't how it should be right now. For me, maybe more than for most, a Holy Week in which we cannot gather feels all kinds of wrong. But Easter will still happen, and we are all still invited more deeply into those mysteries by which God has saved us. And the world is not as it should be. People should not be dying this way, we should not be cooped up in homes that seem to get smaller and messier every day, hospitals should not be having to decide which patients get ventilators and which do not. And we can still join with Jesus in those holy week acts of speaking the truth, loving, and facing even death with integrity and hope. God is coming, mighty and surprising to save. Amen.