

PALM & PASSION SUNDAY 031608

As we prepare to enter Holy Week – the focus of this homily is about our vision – our relationship with Jesus. How do you see Jesus? What kind of a person was he when living in the flesh? What kind of a relationship do you have with the Palm Sunday Jesus? The Holy Thursday and Good Friday Jesus?

Most all of us see Jesus as loving and gentle and caring... and in most senses of those words – this is true. However, the leaders of his time found Jesus' message so threatening that they felt they had to destroy him. The Bible doesn't tell it this way, but I venture that many of those Jewish leaders were good men. They probably had their hearts set on preserving the established order. Like many of us resistant to change, many people had deep fears that Jesus was going to destroy the system. "Don't let Jesus destroy what we know and what serves us well." The leaders and many ordinary citizens were concerned about comfort or their power... their own control... their own perceptions of how things must remain. In one dimension of his teaching about love, Jesus was trying to tell one and all that the fundamental purpose of the Church is to serve others... and many found his message was intolerable. To these leaders – church was about laws and restrictions and practices... This code of Jewish Temple Law had over 600 practices. This created a bewildering array of do's and don'ts. Even to the extent of how water had to flow down the arms of someone who was purifying his hands. This is an example of what religious practice had become to the leaders of Jewish faith.

So today, I ask you to mediate upon... to think about Jesus seen as a dangerous disturber of the peace. Jesus, a brilliant speaker who rocked the boat of status quo... and Jesus seen by others as either the Messiah or at least welcomed as a great new hope. Let us pause to consider this Jesus... the Jesus of then... and the Jesus in our own lives...

How do we see Jesus? Was he just the threat to established religion of the times? How about the Jesus – a man from a backwater area – the son of a humble carpenter? There were those who questioned the origins of Jesus. To those who worried if he had any claim to authority – Jesus challenged them with uncompromising straight talk, such as an example from John's Gospel – Chapter 5: "If I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is not true. But there is another who testifies on my behalf, and I know that the testimony he gives on my behalf is true." Jesus is speaking of God – a blasphemous thing to say in those times.

Jesus may have been loving – but Jesus was also 'in their face.' He challenged them. Jesus was one of the worst possible politicians. If you were His campaign manager, you would almost want to say, "Jesus – can't you just let this particular situation go... and not get them upset with you?" Jesus almost always seemed to say things that would irritate the power structure of the Jewish leaders.

Jesus did things like heal the sick on the Sabbath. He raised someone from the dead on the Sabbath.

In fact, it was in Bethany near Jerusalem that Jesus went to see the dead Lazarus. Jesus ordered them to roll away the stone in front of Lazarus' tomb. Do you remember last Sunday's Gospel? "Master – surely there will be a stench." With the stone rolled away, Jesus called, "Lazarus, come out." Lazarus did emerge – likely hopping, still wrapped in some of the burial shrouds. Depending upon who heard about it, the result of the Lazarus miracle caused anticipation that perhaps the Messiah was really here... or it created an explosion of worry and anger in the power structure of the Jews in the Sanhedrin Court.

Such miracles would lessen the power and influence of the Jewish faith leaders. In their eyes – it may even lead to rebellion. Please listen to these words from Caiphas the high priest – they are eerily chilling – and they are likely words said throughout history to justify any number of situations faced by people in power... Caiphas said, "It is expedient that one man die for the people that the whole nation should not perish."

Jesus the loving and gentle miracle worker was definitely a sign of contradiction... I believe that His challenge remains to this generation as well. One day, they bring a woman caught in adultery to Jesus. Hoping to entrap him – they reminded him that Moses commanded such a person be stoned. We can almost hear the derision in their voices as they ask, "So Teacher.... What do you say about her?"

Ever smarter – ever loving... Jesus pauses to write in the dust on the ground with his finger... perhaps continuing to look down – he says, “Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.” Unable to reply, the accusers and rabble-rousing members of the crowd start to slip away. It was an ingenious reply to their trickery. Jesus confronts the Jewish leadership as a new kind of teacher... a leader who could interpret the principles of law with compassion for the individual.

“Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” “No one, Lord.” “Neither do I condemn you,” he told her. “Go and sin no more.” On such occasions, Jesus’ detractors had no case against him... but it must surely have infuriated those in power.

And then – this day that we call Palm Sunday -- six days before Passover, Jesus returned to Bethany. John’s gospel tells us crowds of Jews came to see this Jesus. It is likely many also came to see the former dead man named Lazarus. Word spread among the crowds that were gathering in Jerusalem for the Passover. Over the coming day, crowds swelled and the road leading to the holy city echoed with Hosannas. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Praise that ought to be echoed throughout all times lasted but a short while. Then comes betrayal and suffering.

In these few moments of thoughts – we have the loving Jesus – but also the Jesus who brings out anger and frustration and worry of leaders... we have hangers-on and curiosity seekers... we have Jesus’ and his followers.

We have those hoping for freedom from the Roman authorities... perhaps even those believing that this was the long-awaited Messiah... So much commotion... So many different reactions to Jesus... the one who challenges status quo... the one who confronts the image that people had of Him... the gentle, loving, merciful shepherd... the powerful teller of stories and teaching messages...

Who is Jesus to you? Do you come to Church today with an inner feeling that it is 'just you and me, Jesus'? Do you come to Church because you want to gain favor with God? Do you believe Jesus has entered the tabernacle of the Catholic Church and that he doesn't enter the hearts of Methodists and Baptists and others? Would Jesus ignore immigrants? Would gentle Jesus speak to a woman living with a man she isn't married to and not tell her it is sinful? Would Jesus wash the feet of criminals locked in jails or prisons? Would Jesus spend an hour in prayer on Holy Thursday evening?

Dear friends – this is the week for meditating on love. Love married to justice and honesty. This is the week for mediating on the costs of self-giving love. If we do this in truth and openness – we may come to the awareness that Jesus' message is: "I welcome you to join me... first, take your place on the back side of my cross... and if you do this – then (THEN) you can join me in a resurrection to new life.