

Sermon April 11, 2003  
“Palms for the Right Pilot?”  
Mark 11: 1-11

Our story today of Jesus’ Triumphal entry into Jerusalem is a familiar one found in each of the gospels, and in one gospel version or another is often read on Palm Sunday. Its familiarity highlights the preacher’s challenge to find something new to say on this day. At least that’s what I struggled with as thought about preaching this sermon. And then I realized that Palm Sunday is not about saying something new. It is presumptuous to think that I would some how have a new take on this text and the event it chronicles; a text that has been preached on countless times by countless others. On a Sunday such as this, in which we annually celebrate such a special event, the challenge is to reconnect with the text. Some years ago I was talking with a friend about my office. He asked what I looked at across from my desk during those seemingly endless hours that I was there at work: for a moment I could not answer. Later I remembered what I looked at, the painting -- a favorite of mine that depicts the place in Maine I have gone to since childhood -- that had hung in my office for nearly twenty years. Now my failure to remember that painting could well be the result of my getting on in years, as my kids are fond of reminding me. But in fact I think it was a reflection of that experience we all have of taking for granted the familiar. Looking at that picture hour after hour day after day, I literally had lost sight of it. Aren’t there pictures, figurines, bric a brac that you have seen so often that you no longer really see them or are conscious of them? Aren’t there ceremonies and rituals that are followed year after year until no one remembers quite why they are being done in particular way or why they are done at all? Do we really hear the words of the Lord’s Prayer every time we say it? I suspect each of you will have had an experience of something becoming so familiar that you actually nearly forgot it or its meaning. That of course is the great risk for us. We hear the words of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem again and again but we fail to hear the story – to find its true meaning anymore.

I want to start today by seeing if we can’t recapture this story that’s being told in Mark’s gospel. It’s the time of the Passover. Winter is over and spring has come to Palestine. The trees are leafing and flowers are peeking up out of the ground. Historians of Jesus day suggest that hundreds of thousands would have been traveling to Jerusalem for this most holy of Jewish observances. In Mark’s account Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem for the first and as it will turn out the last time. As he approaches Jerusalem with his disciples he stops near Bethany and Bethpage -- two towns not far from Jerusalem. In a curious discussion he instructs two of his disciples to reconnoiter in a village on the way to Jerusalem. They are given the specific direction that they will find at a certain spot in that village a colt that has never been ridden. They are told to bring it back. But Jesus is not done with his instructions. Anticipating what is to come Jesus says if any one challenges you when you take this colt tell them, “the Lord (and significantly this is the only time in Mark that term is used) needs it and will return it.” Lo and behold the disciples go into the next town and the colt – the one never before ridden – is exactly where Jesus has predicted. When the disciples start to “borrow” the colt some bystanders challenge them. Not too surprising a response when you think about it, for you have a couple of total strangers drifting into town and appearing to steal a valuable colt. The two disciples reply as instructed, indicating that the colt is for Jesus and amazingly they are allowed to take it. They return to Jesus with the colt. The journey then begins again. The disciples threw their coats over the animal and Jesus riding the colt -- with the disciples walking with him -- proceeds toward Jerusalem.

But interestingly the trip is no longer the private journey of Jesus and his disciples. Now quite remarkably it becomes a virtual royal pilgrimage with people spreading garments and palm branches on the road like a veritable “red carpet” in front of Jesus’ procession. Moreover throngs of people are shouting “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming of the kingdom of our ancestor David.” This procession and the celebration continue until Jesus enters Jerusalem for the first time. Where does Jesus go -- to find shelter no, but to the temple to look over everything there. It is for him the first time he has been there at least as the gospel of Mark lays out Jesus’ life. As night approaches he leaves and returns to Bethany. It should be remembered that starting the next day when Jesus returns to Jerusalem, he commences to cleanse the temple, beginning the confrontation with the leaders of the temple that would lead in a few short days to Good Friday. Quite a story!

Perhaps a place to start is to see if we can understand why Mark included this story in his gospel. It seems to me that this story and Palm Sunday in general are about two things the celebration of Jesus and an understanding of what was being celebrated. The crowds, indeed the disciples, before and on Palm Sunday celebrated Jesus but for reasons that were soon to be shown wrong. Our text is replete with allusions to passages from the Old Testament. The reference to the unridden colt implicitly reflects a passage in the 9th chapter of the book of Zechariah (verse 13), that contains an oracle about a warrior King coming, riding on a colt, to slay the enemies of Israel. Likewise the strewing of garments on the road in front of the procession is reminiscent of the passage in 2 Kings (9: 13). In that verse it is written “then hurriedly they all took their cloaks and spread them for him on the bare steps and they blew the trumpet and proclaimed, “Jehu is King, ”Jehu being the warrior anointed king who among other things caused the death of Jezebel. Moreover, using words of deliverance drawn from Psalm 118, the crowd sees Jesus as bringing the Kingdom of David.

What is quite clear is that the crowd is depicted as seeing Jesus as the new David, the messianic King who will defeat the Romans and will bring back the Kingdom of David. They celebrated because they saw Jesus as the messiah bringing victory through power justly wielded. Of course what they got on Good Friday and on Easter was the victory of seemingly powerless love over loveless power. That of course was not what they expected and I suspect not what they wanted. The gospels don’t tell us but it would be interesting to know how many of those celebrating Jesus on the road to Jerusalem were in the crowd before Pilate, and either stood silently or indeed yelled “Crucify him!” Some 35 to 40 years after Jesus death, Mark was writing to the very early Jewish communities following Jesus that were under siege and suffering great hardship from the Romans. It was critically important that they be reminded that the lesson of Palm Sunday was to focus not on salvation through military might but on salvation through the power of Jesus’ love.

What kind of Jesus do we want? There is no question that this is a day of true celebration but do we always celebrate the real Jesus? Are we always comfortable with the notion that God’s revelation in history is not fulfilled in the demonstration of divine greatness but in the humiliation of the divine human being in his death on the cross? Aren’t there moments in which we want a King who will powerfully right all wrongs? A world in which the divine hand causes everyone to get what’s coming to him or her? But of course that is not what we got or get. The message is one of love not power. And as we have seen the first shall be last and the last shall be first. So it seems to me that the first lesson is to remember that what we are celebrating on Palm Sunday is not necessarily what we want or expect.

When I thought about this aspect of our story today I was reminded of an experience that I had nearly 24 years ago. All three of my children were born by caesarian section. As many of you may know when a baby is going to be delivered that way they try to determine precisely the age of the fetus so that the delivery is done at a time when the baby is ready and able to deal with life after birth. In the very late 70s (and I suspect today) a standard way to determine the age was with a sonogram, a procedure safe for the baby that provides a picture good enough to allow age to be accurately estimated. These pictures are not any that you would ever show to anyone as they look like the worst snowy TV pictures one used to get before cable when trying to pull in that remote station. As a consequence they are not used for much else.

So roughly 24 years ago in the middle of April of 1979 my wife had a sonogram. I was there. The doctor came out afterwards and confirmed what we had suspected that full term would conclude in early October. He then went on to say “you know I don’t normally do this but this sonogram is so clear that if you would like to know I can tell you the sex of your child?” We decided to find out and he told us we were going to have a boy. We put away the books of girls’ names and settled in to find a boy’s name and to bask in the joy of having another son as we already had a son and daughter. On October 2nd the c-section took place. I was in the delivery room and the baby was delivered. The doctor first words were, “you have a beautiful baby girl.” Simultaneously, my wife and I said in unison “What! Are you sure?” To which the doctor said “I ought to be able to tell the difference by now” and he showed us the baby and you know there was no question. We had celebrated the coming of this baby for months and it was right to do so, yet we just weren’t looking for quite the right one to come. And of course the reality was the one who did come was one of the three most wonderful gifts I have ever been given even if I had it a little wrong before the fact. Seems to me that Palm Sunday is a little like that. What the crowd celebrates and we celebrate is the greatest gift we have been given, yet its just not exactly the person we expect or even sometimes want.

There are three final points. Think back to the remarkable scene concerning the colt. The disciples are instructed to simply walk up and take it and if challenged to explain that Jesus needs it. And the villagers allow them to take it because Jesus needed it. It is a little like someone (not even a close friend) coming up and saying can I borrow your new car. I know you’ve never really driven it but this other person needs it and will return it. If you think about it Jesus makes such demands on us. We are to give our talents and time to Jesus, to love our neighbor, to help create the Kingdom of God here on earth, simply because Jesus asks and expects us to. Do we respond like the villagers did with respect to the colt? Or when confronted to give of ourselves do we find an excuse? My litany of responses includes, I am tired, maybe later; or I am busy – call me again-- maybe I can help out then, or some body else will do it and they will do it better. The villagers had it right; real faith demands giving up our talents and time in service to Jesus’ request not simply when it is convenient.

Second, those who threw the garments and the palms in front of Jesus truly had faith. They revealed real devotion and passion in their following of Jesus. There’s was an active response to his presence. Where would we be in that crowd? How many of us would have taken a cloak and laid it before him. How many of us would have cut palms and branches to strew along the path. Would any of us have been hanging in the background-detached observers, thinking, “is this Jesus really special, am I sure. Maybe I need to learn more and think about it some more before I commit.” We are a generation that thinks about things and rightly so. But faith is about action -- about moving mountains, helping the homeless on the common, reaching

out to the lonely and the hurting -- it is not simply about contemplation. The crowd on Palm Sunday put their faith into action; we are challenged to do so as well.

Finally, the Palm Sunday story reminds us that there is inevitably an element of mystery in faith and a need for trust in Jesus. Only one person on that fateful journey knew where Jesus, their guide and the pilot was taking himself and all of them. Jesus had been telling his disciples and they did not believe him. "Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and rebuked him. (8: 31- 32) Peter and the others wanted a victory but not on the cross. Jesus knew the colt was in the village and he went to the temple and looked around because he knew that his destiny was to play out there. None of the rest understood. They had faith in him but they did not know the destination. The same is true for us. Much as we live in a world that prides itself on control, it is so often shown to be an illusion. Despite our best efforts life throws us curve balls when we expect straight ones. Some times the surprises are pleasant sometimes not. Faith demands that we accept a little mystery and that we put trust in the ultimate pilot to take us to the right destination, to that safe harbor even when it is not on our map. The palms were for the right pilot; it's just the destination to which he is taking us that is unexpected.