

Palm Sunday, 2024 Mark 11: 4-9; Mark 15: 16-20 "Praise and Passion"

This is the Sunday of the year when we keenly feel within ourselves, and within the world, that treacherous swing between pious praise of God and murderous rage we don't even understand. The Gospel readings today range from the joyous, thronging sunlit entry of Christ into the city of Jerusalem, hailed as king, to the grim, cruel, thronging mocking of Christ within a government building by soldiers who routinely tormented condemned prisoners with their crimes. King of the Jews, was the accusation by which Christ was deemed a threat to the Roman occupiers, and that was the cry on the lips of both the sunny crowds and the shadowed soldiers.

Temple leaders passed the job on to the Sanhedrin, the local political leaders, who passed it on to the colonial ruler of Israel, Herod, who passed it on to the colonial representative, Pilate, who blamed the colony as he went along with imposing the death penalty to Jesus the Christ. In the history of the church, Christians have blamed the Jewish people and persecuted them for the death of Christ, When we read the story this morning as Mark wrote it for us, we know there is no one to blame but ourselves, for we are a part of the crowds who hailed him without having understanding of who he is, and we are part of the scheming religious authorities who found Christ inconvenient for justifying themselves, and to some varying degree, we are a part of political and economic power that wants to hold on to whatever advantage we may hold over others.

"The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God," Mark begins. In the passion account, Mark means, by the Holy Spirit, to make us see that we are a part not just of Christ dying, but of putting Him to death. And so we are. We are guilty of rejecting and trying to do away with Christ. Mark is the Gospel writer who leaves the ending open, who says, "They were afraid," and just leaves it at that. But Mark is telling us the Gospel, so this is a story about what Christ did for us and is doing for us. (Others have tried to fill in the ending, but unless the Holy Spirit allowed his ending to be lost, Mark just leaves it at the disciples fear.)

Neither the palms nor the mocking of the soldiers was appropriate for the King of Glory. No-one knew what love and obedience motivated Christ, nor what the Kingdom of God was. Perhaps the blameless donkey was included to be a companion and comfort to Jesus while the crowds praised him without understanding their own hearts or what was happening to Jesus.

The crowds rooted for their colonial masters to be overthrown and their own nation to be re-established, not considering that a cleansing of the nation would be deeper and more far-reaching than they could imagine, that their very hearts would have to be cleansed, and the

rest of the world included in the kingdom of God. Rather than listening to the words of Christ and trusting in him, they were being swept along with the crowd

The soldiers did what their superiors expected them to do, to amplify the guilty verdict, the death penalty by mocking and torturing the condemned prisoner. The cohort Mark mentions would have been about 600 soldiers. Were they all there? Even a fraction of that body would have been terrifying to the prisoner. They did what was expected, and some of them enjoyed making fun of the prisoner and others went along with it and others didn't like being a part of the cruel game, but they were all guilty.

I don't believe Christ loved the palms and He suffered with the thorns being beat into His head with a stick and being mocked for what was the truth. He could see how the crowds were careless with their commitment to the God of the Covenant, and He could see how the young men, the soldiers, were being led down a path of careless violence to serve those in power. Over these two thousand years, the church has thought about what Christ suffered that day—how much as God, how much as a man.

Certainly, the remembrance of Christ's passion is endless. We are guilty of Christ's death, as sinners who needed redemption and as sinners who wanted Him out of our lives and out of the earth.

However, we gather this morning to love and thank God for all Christ has done for love of us. Suppose you were to sacrifice your life for someone you dearly love. What if that person spent the rest of their days in self-hatred and paralysis of unworthiness of the loss of your life. Would that please you?

See, the Gospel is life. We are in death, and Christ died that death in our place, and now we live. We are to take the life that God gave us. The better we understand the Gospel, the freer of guilt and shame we will be. For that is the reason that Christ died.

Can we believe this morning, not in deliverance just for our own people, but for all the people of the world? Can we believe this morning, not just be bound to unthinkingly mock and hurt those condemned by the powers, but to choose peace and courage of truth?

Can you let the burden of your very real as well as imagine guilt, roll off your shoulders to the cross today? That would be a joyous Palm Sunday indeed.