

Palm Sunday Sermon, April 10, 2022

When Jesus decided to go to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover, he had a really good idea of what would likely happen. He was a smart man, and honestly, it wouldn't take a genius to figure out that the authorities, both Jewish and Roman, would not be pleased with him criticizing them. Publicly. And he didn't sneak quietly into the city and keep a low profile. Instead he rode a donkey into Jerusalem, fulfilling the prophecy about the Messiah coming on a donkey, and he let people hail him as the King coming in the name of the Lord. When the Jewish authorities tried to hush the crowd, he said the rocks would cry out Hosanna if the crowd stopped.

And he didn't keep a low profile after that either. He went off to the temple and overturned the tables of the money changers and chased out all the sacrificial animals and let the doves go free. So he lost the priests a lot of profit and made a lot of enemies. And then he spent a lot of time teaching right in the temple courts and when they tried to trap him with trick questions, he made them look foolish.

And we just read what happened next. The Jewish leadership conspired to kill him. One of his own closest friends and disciples betrayed him. The others deserted him. One denied even knowing him. And the Roman leadership didn't want any rebellions or riots and they cared more about keeping the peace than about justice. So they crucified him. And all these things were quite predictable. And indeed, Jesus did predict them.

As Anglican Christians, it is our practice to enter into these events during Holy Week. We have extra services and we look deeply into the love, the suffering and the death of Jesus, before we move on to Easter and the story of his resurrection. We are not the only church that does this, but many don't. And many people like to skip these services and go straight to Easter. Now, why do we do these things? Why do we look so closely at Jesus' suffering and death?

Because most of our society likes to "stay positive." They like to only look at pleasant, nice, comfortable stuff and not look at anything painful or ugly or nasty. And the reason for that is obvious: it hurts. It makes us feel uncomfortable. It makes us feel our own suffering, and that is painful. It may even make us look at our own shortcomings and failures, and that is even more uncomfortable. And it reminds us that one day we will die. And most people prefer not to think too much about that. So why do we do it?

Well, one reason, and maybe the greatest reason, is because we love Jesus. True love doesn't turn away when the loved one is in pain. True love goes to the person who is suffering. And also, when we love someone, we want to know them better. Knowing how someone behaves when everything is rosy, is one thing. Seeing how they behave when things aren't, is quite another. As we watch Jesus go through this week of suffering, we learn so much about him. And, because he is the Son of God, God incarnate, we learn a lot about God, too, whom we also love. And learning more about Jesus, helps us to understand him better and love him more.

And of course, we are also followers of Jesus, his disciples. When we see how he responds to harassment, to visible oppression, to unjust treatment, to unmerited suffering, we have an example to follow. Jesus was not afraid of those who wanted to kill him. He stood up to them. He didn't let them get in the way of proclaiming the coming Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of love and peace. He went right to the heart of where they were, and he proclaimed to them the way God desires us to live. And he criticized the way they were running things, exploiting the poor with their temple taxes and binding heavy burdens for them to bear. He had courage and he cared deeply about justice and equity.

And although Jesus stood up to the rulers and publicly pointed out the bad things they were doing, he never used violence against them, never demeaned them as people. He met their violence with strong, non-violent resistance. Although he tells his disciples they may need swords, he won't let them use them and heals the one person who is hurt. He returns good for evil. He forgives them. He never shuts the door on them. His love for everyone didn't waver, even in the face of the strongest violence.

Even in his suffering, he felt compassion for others, for the guy who lost his ear, for the disciples, for the women of Jerusalem, for the good thief. It was his love and compassion for others that led him to walk the way of the cross to the very end. He was willing to suffer for others. We learn so much from really meditating on the passion and death of Jesus. We learn about what God is like.

I read this week about a Roman Catholic sister, Mother Elisabeth Rivet. She was the Mother Superior of her convent in France at the time of the German invasion in World War II. She actively used her convent to help the French resistance and to help Jewish people get away. She would even dress Jewish women as nuns to hide them. In the end she was arrested and sent to a concentration camp, where she comforted and helped people. Shortly before the end of the war, she volunteered to take the place of another woman who had been condemned to go to the ovens, because that woman was a mother and she wanted to spare her for her children. Now there's someone who has understood the message and example of Jesus, in being willing to suffer and die for someone else.

But there's another reason to go through this week with Jesus. Every one of us has suffered in our lives and every one of us will suffer again. Suffering is part of life. We will also all die. Every human being is going to die one day. Death is also a part of life. If we go through life pretending to ourselves that everything is "positive," and never allowing ourselves to look at suffering, then when these things come upon us we will not be prepared for them. They will also upset all our ideas about the world and we will not only have the suffering to deal with, but also our world view will be shattered, which is probably even worse.

When we walk with Jesus through this week, when we allow ourselves to enter into his suffering, when we let ourselves feel deeply the pain of injustice, betrayal and abandonment, we also come to terms with those things in our own lives. We can accept them as a part of life and stop being so afraid of them.

And if we allow ourselves to be honest, we will also see that we ourselves have done these very things to other people. Not crucified them, but betrayed them, deserted them, hurt them. I don't mean we should wallow in guilt, which tends to be all about us and how awful we are, and is very rarely helpful. But we can allow ourselves to come face to face with our failures and to deeply feel the remorse of those things, which is all about compassion for the person we've hurt. We may even realise that in inflicting suffering on other people, we are inflicting it on Christ, who bears all our sorrows.

This is painful to do, but it is transformative. When we allow ourselves to come to terms with that - with our own sinfulness - and to feel the remorse, then we can begin to be free of those things, the impulse to keep doing them for one thing, but also begin to receive the assurance of forgiveness that Jesus offers us from the cross. Because that's also part of the story that we can enter into so deeply, the experience of being forgiven and still loved.

And in standing with Mary and Mary Magdalene and the other women at the foot of the cross, we also come face to face with our own death. And in accepting that we will, indeed, die one day, it frees us to live, without fear. Ironically, when we're so afraid of death that we can't think about it, we are unable to live freely either.

When we allow ourselves to experience the suffering of Jesus with him during Holy Week, we also begin to realise that he is willing to experience our suffering along with us, whenever it comes in our lives, or at our death. Having seen him bearing the cross all the way to Golgotha, we know he won't hesitate to walk with us into whatever life sends us. And having experienced this and knowing he is there for us, we will be more willing to turn to him when we do experience suffering, and invite him into it with us. To share more of our lives with Jesus, not just the good bits.

And when we enter so fully and freely into the suffering and death of Jesus, allow ourselves to feel the sadness and pain of those things, then we are also opening ourselves to the new life that will stir Jesus from death. It is only through the transformation of suffering and death that new life can be born. New life. Not just more of the old life, but the new life of Christ stirring within us and growing up within us like a fountain of living water.

I encourage us all this Holy Week to follow after Jesus all the way to the Temple, all the way to the Last Supper, all the way to the Garden of Gethsemane and the Roman court, follow Jesus all the way to the Hill of Golgotha so that we can more fully know Jesus, more fully share our lives with him and more fully appreciate the empty tomb at Easter and enter into the joy of Resurrection life.