

Palm/Passion Sunday

April 14, 2019

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Philippians 2:5-11

Luke 22:39—23:56

There are certain occasions when a sermon is unnecessary. There are those who say that it's best on Palm Sunday to let the liturgy speak for itself. I heeded that advice ... after a fashion.

I don't typically preach a sermon, as such, on Palm Sunday. But I will offer a brief observation.

A couple of observations really. First – and VERY briefly – is simply the reminder that the Jews did not kill Jesus. The Romans killed Jesus, employing their engineering prowess to cruel effect.

But mainly what I observe this year, as I consider once more this old, familiar tale of terror, is the prevalence of fear. Everyone is driven by their fears – Jew and Roman alike.

Fear pervades the scene in the garden. The whole betrayal is filled with a “cloak and dagger” atmosphere. The chief priests and temple police look for a way to put Jesus to death because of the threat they perceive him to be. But they move surreptitiously, for fear of the people. So Judas comes in the dead of night, and betrays Jesus to those afraid to act in the light of day.

And the disciples, out of fear, do what seems entirely natural to us, even 2,000 years later: they strike back. Threatened by a crowd armed with clubs and swords, one of those with Jesus grabs a sword of his own ... and cuts off the ear of the slave of the high priest.

Peter, blessed Peter, cannot help himself. He follows to see what will happen, all the while keeping what he presumes to be a safe distance. But it isn't safe. He's recognized as a follower. And out of fear, he denies knowing the one he once had boldly proclaimed to be the Messiah.

And when the cock crows and Jesus looks over at Peter, Peter withdraws under another cloak of fear, the fear that he could, by this denial, prove himself to be so spineless. And he leaves.

And for all their might, even the Romans seem fearful. They do all they can to impose their version of peace on an occupied territory, but fear of the next outburst makes them cruel, so it seems to me. Soldiers mock Jesus and beat him. They blindfold him and taunt him.

And even Pilate, with the full weight of the Roman Empire behind him, desperately jumps at the chance to push the problem of Jesus off to Herod. And when Herod returns Jesus to him, he tries to do the right thing and release Jesus. But in the face of an agitated crowd, whose fears, it seems have been stoked by their acknowledged leaders, Pilate grows weak ... and relents.

Fear pervades everything. Fear drives everyone – Roman and Jew, leaders and followers alike.

Everyone that is, except for Jesus. He alone faces the fear and refuses to be driven by it. Even as he marches to his death, he spares a word for women beating their breasts in sorrow. Even hanging on the cross, he offers comfort to the criminal beside him. Jesus alone remains true.

That's what today – and the whole of this Holy Week – is all about. This week that is the culmination of the all the weeks and months and years of Jesus' life. "Being born in human likeness" (as St. Paul says in Philippians), Jesus walked the way that is common to us all: full of joys, to be sure; and marked by pain and sorrow and fear.

That is our focus this Holy Week. We are invited, once more, to follow the way of Jesus, the way of love, the way of the cross ... and to learn what it tells us about how to live life – not without fear, to be sure, but to live a life never driven by the fears that are common to us all.