Palm Sunday

A sermon preached at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, OH on April 9, 2017 by Associate Rector Richard C. Israel.

Lord Jesus Christ, on this day you walk ahead of us on your way to Jerusalem and with your disciples, we follow behind, frightened, uncertain. Lead us, we pray, with your truth, courage and love, and give us strength to live our lives with passion and commitment to match yours. Amen.

Palm Sunday is a day of special intensity, a day we do things we do not ordinarily do, and hear things we don’t usually hear. Today, we enter into the story of Jesus’ crucifixion and death, a story that will unfold throughout this week that we call Holy. We need to hear this story because without hearing it the resurrection makes no sense.

Perhaps the clearest note of Palm Sunday is that of rejection. During this liturgy we have twice acted the part of the crowd in Jerusalem. Processing with our palms, we shouted “Hosanna”, which means “save us”, save us now, to Jesus. The second was just minutes ago, but the words of the crowd had changed from “Hosanna” to “crucify him”. This movement from “hosanna” to “crucify him” is the great rejection of Palm Sunday. Such rejection continues every time we discover that life is not the way we want it to be and move our attention from Christ to some one or some thing that might offer quicker relief from whatever we think ails us. This rejection is what ties our lives to the life of that crowd in Jerusalem; and makes every day a potential Palm Sunday.

But there are some other rejections going on in this story. In Gethsemen, Jesus rejected his own wellbeing in favor of doing his Father’s will. Then when they came to arrest him, he rejected violence as a means to protect himself and his mission.

Later, as Jesus is on trial, we see him reject making a legal defense. Surely, he could have bested his accusers in debate as he had done so often throughout his ministry. But by his silence, Jesus refused to acknowledge the ultimate authority of a system that could punish, but not redeem humankind.

Jesus’ final rejection comes on the cross. “If you are the son of God, come down from the cross.” Jesus heard this echo of the words Satan used to tempt him in the wilderness and again refused to use divine power to put on a show. Forsaken at last even by God, Jesus cried out and died, rejecting every form of coercive power available to him. He rejected the power of armies and swords; the power of persuasion, and finally the spectacular power of divinity. Jesus rejects all the sources of power that hurt, that force, that compel; that divide the world into winners and losers. Instead he relied only on the power of self-giving love to show us the heart of God.

I was raised in a tradition that taught that Jesus died for our sins to appease a judgmental Father—theology that over centuries has blessed violence and bigotry in the name of God. But we who see ourselves in the fickle crowd are called to see the cross as
the way to healing, forgiveness, and inclusion. James Carroll wrote, “Christ did not die on the cross to change the mind of God, Christ died on the cross to reveal the love of God to you and me.”

One of the lessons we learn from the cross is that we are given one instrument with which to be the continuing presence of Christ in this world. We are given love, and in Jesus, we are shown what love looks like. It’s not what we expect or want. We want to be lifted away from uncertainty and dread to see things calmly from a heavenly vista, our frailty left behind. We don’t want the messiness of this world, the future still to make, steps in trust to be taken over deep and stormy waters. We don’t want to be responsible—able to respond—to the love of God. That is what Jesus was doing when he rode into Jerusalem on that donkey, embodying peace not violence, so that all people would be drawn to him on the cross.

Yet in the cross of Christ we find that love is more powerful than death. As we pursue the way of love, especially when love compels us, as it always will, to leave the safety of this sanctuary and certitudes of faith that would deny the way of the cross, we will find that love is enough.