

Why Do Christians Like Palm Sunday?

Mark 11:1-11

Every year, as we in the church prepare to observe Holy Week, I hear persons say that Palm Sunday is one of their favorite days on the Christian calendar. I'm fond of Palm Sunday myself. I feel a sense of excitement as we come to the end of the Lenten Season and ready our hearts and minds to commemorate the resurrection of Jesus the Christ. Palm Sunday tells us that the time is near.

As I read the gospel stories of Jesus' royal entry into Jerusalem last week, I felt myself asking specifically why Palm Sunday is special to so many Christians. The obvious things came to mind first. The events of Palm Sunday were a prelude to what was to come for Jesus. They were anticipatory. We like anticipation; sometimes the best part of a journey is the departure. Possibilities seem boundless at the outset of any venture. I once had a poster on the wall of my office with the caption, "Things are always best at their beginning."

Also, we like Palm Sunday because it represents something we can grasp. Easter fills us with awe and hope (as well it should), but it seems beyond us. There is no explanation for the resurrection that satisfies us. Most of us who preach will agree that Christmas and Easter are the most challenging days on the calendar. Nothing we say can come close to the wonder of what we are trying to proclaim. But Palm Sunday is different. We can visualize the scene; we can understand some of the forces at work.

Possibly we like Palm Sunday because it occurs when it does. Warmth, color, and feelings of renewal make this season what Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales* called "a time for pilgrimages." This day appeals to stirrings within our hearts.

For these reasons—anticipation, understanding, timing—Palm Sunday gets our attention. And yet I think these are surface things at best. This day

touches something much more profound within us. Let's re-create Palm Sunday not so much with the eye of the mind as with the eye of the heart and try to see the appeal it has for us.

Upon a first reading we feel a deep delight in the reception that Jesus received as he rode into Jerusalem. For once, we think, he was given the welcome he deserved. Some persons still call this episode "the triumphal entry." A part of us is drawn to a need to win, to get proper attention, and to show everyone that we are right. That's why we are attracted to sports; that's why we are so ready to argue and even fight.

When you move through the gospels, you read the words of Jesus and marvel at his deeds, and you wonder why he was not universally accepted. There were times of large crowds and wide acclaim, but the people drifted away and the opposition to Jesus expanded. We look at the story today and we ask how that happened. It should have ended differently. At least on that Sunday of Jesus' ride on the donkey things were as they should have been, according to the way we want to see it. The crowds gathered, the cheers mounted, and Jesus' place was recognized, even if but temporarily. Even though I know better, I still find satisfaction in the moment of triumph Jesus seemed to enjoy.

The experience got attention then and it gets attention now. That was what Jesus intended. He made the arrangements for the ride and fully expected people to gather. But it was not praise and acclaim that he sought. He did not wave, point his index finger toward the sky, and shout, "We're number one!" Henri Nouwen imagines it this way: "As he rides into Jerusalem surrounded by people shouting 'Hosanna,' 'cutting branches from the trees and spreading them in his path,' Jesus appears completely concentrated on something else. He does not look at the excited crowd. He sees beyond the noise and movement to what is ahead of him: an agonizing journey of betrayal, torture, crucifixion, and death. His unfocused eyes can see what nobody around him can see; his high forehead reflects a knowledge of things to come far beyond anyone's understanding."

(Reflections on 14th century sculpture *Christus auf Palmesel, Jesus, a Gospel*, pp 81-82.)

In our better moments we concede that Jesus had a deeper purpose than simply showing the Jewish and Roman authorities “what was what.” Our hearts tell us that there was more to it than that. When we focus on the scene, an amazing awareness begins to emerge. We detect a contrast between the way of political and religious power and the way of love. Consider the two sides.

We have the story of Jesus’ ride into the city on the Sunday preceding the celebration of Passover in all its detail. On perhaps the same day that Jesus entered Jerusalem through the eastern gate from the Mount of Olives, Pontius Pilate rode into the city from the west. At a time such as Passover the Roman leader would come from his residence in Caesarea Maritima. He had to be present, not to observe religious festivities but to be seen and to maintain order. It was a political duty.

It is possible that Pilate and Jesus arrived at the same time. Imagine the differences. Pilate would have ridden a chariot or a great horse; Jesus mounted a donkey. Pilate was surrounded by soldiers with weapons and banners, their step set by the beat of drums; Jesus was led by energetic but naïve pilgrims with his disciples hanging back in fear. Crowds were forced to hail Pilate’s arrival, maybe even to chant “Caesar is Lord” as Caesar’s representative passed; Jesus’ followers were taking a risk just by being present. Pontius Pilate symbolized the kingdom of political, religious, and economic power; Jesus symbolized the kingdom of God.

At this point we realize where we belong. We realize that we need what Jesus offers—love, acceptance, forgiveness, and grace. The other way leaves us searching for more. It is the kingdom that Jesus came to reveal that leads to life. Here is the power of our faith. Here is the power of love, humility, and sacrifice.

I think of a story about Saint Francis of Assisi. Once a man named Silvester saw Francis and Bernard distributing money to the poor. Silvester was “seized with greed” and said to Francis, “You did not pay all you owe for those stones you bought from me to repair the churches.” Francis, according to the story, “marveled at his greed.” He reached into his bag and gave Silvester all the money he could hold, money that had been collected for charity. He said, “If you ask for more, I will give you more.”

It was Silvester’s turn to marvel, first with his own wealth and power, but then with the silent power and control that Francis seemed to possess. Night after night Silvester was tortured by the realization that he was so powerless in the face of Francis’ generosity. At length Silvester gave the money from Francis and much more of his own to the poor. He became a follower of Francis. In time it was said that Silvester became “so holy and filled with grace that he spoke with God as one friend to another.”

Deep down we know that love is the greatest power, that non-violence is the way of change, and that reconciliation, not conquest, is the way to peace. Jesus embodied all those things that day on the donkey. I like to think that he still rides among us and walks among us pointing the way to fullness of life.

Could that be why we like Palm Sunday?

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