

Palm Sunday C
Luke 22:14-23:56
The Rev. Bonnie Underwood
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We All Need Forgiveness

Today we begin Holy Week with the liturgy of the Palms and the Passion. Originally, both the passion and resurrection of Christ were celebrated at the Easter Vigil, but during the 4th century there was a heightened interest in Christian history and, under the rule of Constantine, churches were being constructed on sacred sites throughout the Holy Land. More and more pilgrims flooded into Jerusalem during Easter, so a series of services were developed that became what we now know as Holy Week. These services help us both to remember the historical events of the passion, but also to commemorate these events, giving us an opportunity to walk more closely with Jesus, helping us to open our eyes and our hearts to the way of the cross, so that (as we heard in today's opening Collect) we may find it none other than the way of life and peace.

While we were outside, preparing for our palm procession, we read about Jesus' joyous entry into Jerusalem. Just now, we all participated in the reading of the Passion of our Lord. These two parts of the service, these two sets of readings, are purposefully placed closely together, reminding us of what this week is all about — for within days of the crowds proclaiming "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" the shouting changed to "Crucify Him! Crucify Him!"

How does this happen in only a few days? Why did the crowds react so violently to Jesus?

I could talk about differing views of who the Messiah is, about confusion over a warrior king, rather than a suffering servant. Or the desire of those in power to maintain control. And those reasons are all part of the story.

But instead I want of us to think about our own human nature, a truth about who we are, about our human tendency to try to gain a kind of relative peace by uniting, by rallying together, against the other.

In today's Gospel story, we see an unlikely alliance form between Herod and Pilate. Pilate sends Jesus to Herod for judgment, Herod tosses Jesus back to Pilate. Both seem to acknowledge that Jesus is innocent, and we hear from Luke "That same day Herod and Pilate became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies." Herod and Pilate were united in their need to unify against the disruption, the potential volatility of Jesus and his followers.

This is what we do. We build alliances, even among those we are hostile towards, to join against a common enemy. And it's a real juggling act to manage. Sometimes this kind of unification does have a positive side. We can do good work by joining together with people of differing views, whether that's in ecumenical and interfaith relationships, or when opposite sides of the political aisles find common ground to deal with issues of injustice and oppression.

But there's also a darker side to alliances, a dark side that involves scapegoating to create a common enemy by negatively dehumanizing others, marginalizing and stereotyping others for reasons race or religion. These alliances blame the weak for the majority's current lot in life, for whatever problem those on top may be experiencing. Since ancient times, since the beginning of human societies, one way of keeping the peace within a community has been to unify against the weak, the minorities, and the oppressed by making them scapegoats.

And that way of life continues today. We see this blaming-tendency in the political rhetoric of this election season, in charged immigration and refugee dialogues, in continuing racial tensions, as we turn against our neighbors, particularly minorities and those on the margins, as we seek to secure our own safety and security at the expense of others.

Who killed Jesus? Who is to blame?

To scapegoat, to blame any person or group of people, is missing the point of the gospel. For the Christian Gospel isn't about a particular group or individual needing forgiveness, but about all of us needing forgiveness —ALL of us — the people who were there during those days leading up to what we now call Good Friday, as well as every one of us here today.

We all need forgiveness. We need forgiveness for our willingness to gain the relative peace and safety of some by sacrificing the hopes of others.

This human way of finding peace does not have to be our way. We have a new source of light and life in Jesus, a new way of coming together that doesn't mean that in order for some to win, others must lose. We can express our love of God by loving our neighbor as ourselves.

And as we begin Holy Week, together we proclaim that Jesus is King and we are his people. We carry these Palm branches as signs of his victory. Be strengthened by the Word, nourished at this table, supported within the community of faith, as together we strive to follow Jesus in the way of the cross, the way to eternal life — for Christ is the way of life and peace.