

Palm Sunday

Year A, 2014

Why did Jesus do it? Why did he force the issue with the religious leaders of his people and ultimately with the Roman occupiers? Before the story we heard today that we remember as “Palm Sunday,” Jesus was known as a wise teacher and compassionate healer. He was doing much good for many people on the periphery of the powerful of his day, both religious and political. One wonders why Jesus couldn’t have lived his life simply focusing on doing good deeds and teaching—being a savior by example, so to speak.

And Jesus was that—a unique and gifted teacher whose words still teach us centuries later. But today, on Palm Sunday when we also remember the Passion story, we remember how Jesus forced the issue. So why did Jesus take this path? Why did he call his followers to take it, too, telling us to “take up our cross and follow him”? I confess I am more comfortable with the good example and teaching part of our faith—you are less likely to get killed!

The reason why Jesus forced the issue is because he was and is such a powerful teacher and healer. Like all good healers, Jesus diagnosed what was really wrong with society and worked to expose it. Like all good teachers, Jesus knew the best way to teach people what they needed to understand. If Jesus had continued as he was in his ministry, as a teacher and healer, his followers could have continued with the status quo and little would have changed. They could turn to Jesus for help when they needed it for themselves or their families. By Jesus going to Jerusalem-- and to the cross—the real, deep issues of life were revealed and our understanding of our world was changed forever.

Jesus knew what he was doing that day as he told his disciples how to find the donkey and as he rode it into Jerusalem. He was reenacting an ancient practice, part of the public liturgy leading up to the anointing of a king. The people knew what Jesus was doing and responded to him. By taking on this kingly role, Jesus was becoming the focus not only of their adoration, but of their expectations. Jesus understood they would be expecting a dramatic change from him, something consistent with being the Messiah. Jesus delivered that dramatic change but in unexpected ways.

Instead of uniting his people and leading a military revolt against the hated Romans, Jesus focused on dramatic change among his own people and especially their leaders. Matthew’s Gospel tells us that right after his entry into Jerusalem, Jesus cleansed the Temple of people using that holy place for commerce instead of prayer. Then Jesus told one pointed parable or lesson after another, making clear that the leaders of his people, the protectors of the status quo, were more concerned with maintaining their way of life than with following the way of God. Jesus’ action brought things into focus for his people—and for us today.

The leaders of the status quo could not stand this upstart, this outsider from Galilee, this person outside their circle of power, challenging them and how they did things. How dare this country rabbi

ride in as king; how dare he knock over authorized exchange tables and scatter silver coins in the courts of the Temple and talk about the importance of prayer. Who was this man?

By his actions, Jesus revealed what was wrong with his society. Whatever their good intentions, the religious leaders were willing to do whatever it took to maintain their power and privilege. And these same leaders could manipulate their people to follow them even to the point of using violence to get their way. That was the core issue.

Those words and events following Jesus' ride in on that donkey would lead to his death. Jesus exposed the dark side of the respected and the powerful. Jesus' death revealed the part of the powerful that can cause so much damage. Jesus' death also revealed how we—not only the people back them, but all of us—can be complicit with the powerful in the damage we do or that we authorize to be done in our name. Remember that troubling refrain we just said, "Crucify him!"

Yet Jesus shed light on all that darkness not to destroy the powerful, but to bring their sin into the open so that they—and all of us—might repent and be healed. That is the good news that comes to us through Jesus' death. And thanks be to God, that violence was not the end of the story. In his victorious resurrection, Jesus proved that he could take the worse the powers could do, absorb it into his body, then rise up and transform their worst into God's grace. Their pursuit of power, control, and violence could not stop God's goodness, mercy, and forgiveness from breaking free of the tomb.

That is the good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus. So what does that good news mean for us? What does it mean in particular in our response to Jesus' call for us to take up our cross and follow him? Those are important questions to take with us into Holy Week. Let's avoid simple answers and instead struggle and pray with what it means for us and for our world today.

Here are a few possibilities we can consider in the holy days ahead:

First it is important for each of us to see our own complicity in what is wrong with the world. We may be silent as other people have their rights, their property, even their lives taken away. We may even be the people who do those things in big and small ways. Some crimes people commit are obvious—an executive who embezzles millions or a bank robber who steals thousands. More likely we may do something like gossiping about a friend and causing harm to their reputation. We participate directly or indirectly in the world and its problems. So we need to remember our part and ask God for forgiveness of our sins and the grace to change.

And as we receive that forgiveness and grace and follow the call to take up our cross, we may find ourselves changing in unexpected ways. We may become uncomfortable with our former opinions and past politics and even our deeply held convictions. We may change our point of view because of the cross of Jesus. We may write letters or even march on the capitol. Because taking up our cross is about more than personal forgiveness, self-denial and moral standards. It is also about action and justice for the people we are connected to through the cross of Jesus.

Like the people on death row. Can you think of a more direct way to identify with Jesus and the cross than through people who will be executed in our name by the state? Public policy about capital punishment is controversial and people of good will can disagree on it. But as a follower of Jesus, ask yourself three questions: What if one person who is innocent is killed? What if one person who *is* guilty of the crime he or she is convicted of has really changed and can make a difference in the world? And even if neither of those questions apply and a convicted inmate on death row is unrepentant and guilty—what about us? As Christians, we say we believe in mercy. Is execution consistent with that?

Another area to focus on as we take up our cross is the church. From the time Jesus entered Jerusalem to when he took up his cross, Jesus agitated the religious leaders of his day. When we take up our cross today, how can we challenge and change our churches?

In the church's history, too often the church has been part of the problem instead of part of God's solution. For example, in tragic irony, the church has misused Jesus' Passion story to blame and persecute Jewish people for Jesus' death. That is horrifically missing the point. When the church has done that, we have committed the same abuse of power and use of violence that was done to Jesus; but this time we have done it in Jesus' name. Jesus' Passion reveals the darkness in our hearts (regardless of our religion or lack thereof) and how that darkness can cause such great harm in the world.

There are other historical sins such as the church's approval of the slave trade and the oppression of native people. More recently there is the sexual abuse scandal and cover-up in the Roman Catholic Church. Too often too many churches have forgotten our Lord and especially his cross. Sadly the church has been part of doing to others what was done to Jesus. The church has done that to preserve its power and privilege instead of caring for all God's people. And worse of all, the church has done it in Jesus' name!

The list can go on about the abuse of power today by governments and churches and other institutions. As followers of Jesus and as we enter Holy week, let us be prepared like Jesus was on the first Palm Sunday to "force the issue" in our world. Let us find ways to act and speak to reveal what's wrong in our most respected institutions. And then let us offer God's grace to those who have been harmed-- and to those who have done great harm-- so that there might be healing and reconciliation.

These are tough issues and I do not know all the answers. But Holy Week is not the time for easy answers.

Amen.