

Weekly Reading – Monday, March 30, 2009

The lessons we focus on here are those for Palm/ Passion Sunday, April 5, 2009. Some churches observe only Palm Sunday, saving the Passion story for Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. Others include both, starting with the Palm Sunday gospel, then moving to the Passion Story, which comes from the Gospel of the Year, Mark. There are shorter (15: 1 - 39) and longer (14: 1 - 15: 47) versions to choose from there.

Mark 11: 1 - 11

The familiar story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, marking the conclusion of a journey that began in chapter 8. It's all here, the disciples directed to go and get a colt (not donkey) that has never been ridden before. The cloaks and leafy branches spread on the roadway as Jesus rode in on the small animal. The shouts of "Hosanna!" and "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" The concluding verse strikes a note of solemn foreboding: "Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve." What does it mean that Jesus chose not to stay in Jerusalem? Anything? Without putting too fine a point on the story communicates not only foreboding, but a sense that Jesus has foreknowledge, that he knows what lies ahead. This tends to move the events of Holy Week out of the category of plot and conspiracy and into the category of fulfillment of plan or destiny. A tension exists between these two, human evil and divine purpose, and it will run throughout the events of the week. It will not resolve in favor of one or the other; the tension will be held. Fleming Rutledge describes Palm/ Passion Sunday as "the Trojan Horse" of the Christian year. Partly she means, it starts off looking like fun and then turns hard and challenging. At a deeper level we discover that the enemy isn't "out there," but rather and like the Trojan horse, the enemy is "in here."

Isaiah 50: 4 - 9a

A psalm-like reading, one of the songs of the Suffering Servant, of which we hear several during Holy Week. The Servant will suffer, but is obedient to God and sustained by God in the midst of his rejection and suffering. The note of obedience is sounded in verse 5, "The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward." Confidence in God in verse 9, "It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty?" The Church has understood Jesus and the cross through the lens of this and similar readings from Isaiah, and subsequent Christian witnesses and martyrs have found meaning and solace in times of rejection and suffering. Theologically, at least part of the point is to question, or offer an alternative to, the idea that those who suffer must have done something wrong, something to deserve it. In a culture of "official optimism" like our own it is easy to look upon the wretched and despised with easy and callous judgment. But Scripture teaches us that the one we may so judge and dismiss is none other than our Lord.

Philippians 2: 5 - 11

This reading is basically the early Christian hymn, perhaps written for baptism, that Paul has woven into his teaching to the Philippian congregation about having the mind of Christ among them. Again the same notes of humility, obedience and suffering are sounded as in Isaiah. Here Christ is clearly the "servant leader" to use the words of Robert Greenleaf's study of leadership. But note that servant leadership does not mean being at the beck and call of every person's need or whim; it means serving God and God's mission. Sometimes in the embrace of this message of kenosis or self-emptying sounded so forcefully in this lesson, or its more contemporary iteration of "being a servant," we imagine that this practice of discipleship and being a servant means being driven by the needs and agendas of anyone and everyone, whether congregation, family or friends. No, Christ empties himself that he may be vessel for God's plan and purpose. Rather than being a "need-filler," the servant leader serves the mission of God.

Mark 14: 1 - 15: 47 or Mark 15: 1 - 39

I prefer the longer version but if that is being read on Maundy Thursday or Good Friday the shorter version may be acceptable here. One possibility for preaching, should the Passion narrative be read in Palm/ Passion worship, is that the preacher give a kind of introduction and overview, paying particular attention to the accents and emphases of the particular gospel before us, which this year is Mark. Consistent with Mark's overall portrayal of the disciples, one clear emphasis of the his Passion is the utter failure of the disciples, whether by outright denial (Peter) or betrayal (Judas) or desertion (the rest). This provides a mirror to ourselves (disciples = church) that pops the bubble of self-righteousness. Second, in Mark's Passion Jesus is pretty much silent; certainly not the triumphant Jesus of John who says, "It is finished" from the cross, nor even the forgiving Jesus of Luke, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." Jesus is, as Fred Craddock puts it, more "acted upon than acting." A good year for the spiritual, "He Neva' said a Mumblin' Word." Overall, the account is terse, as is all of Mark, with the emphasis on action and events. While suffering and death are reported they are not wallowed in. The larger theological meaning emerges as the corollary of the clear sense of Jesus' utter aloneness and abandonment. That is, as Paul puts it, "All (of us) have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." Emphasis on "all." "There is none who is righteous, no, not one." Humankind is presented as without exception, from high priest to lead disciple, from Jerusalem by-stander to Pilate washing his hands, as guilty, caught in Sin and Death. Christ alone is innocent. In Christ God acts for the salvation of sinful humanity, that most inclusive of categories.