

Palm Sunday, the Sunday of the Passion

Mk 11:1-11; Ps 31:9-16; Isa 50:4-9a; Phil 2:5-11, Mk 14.1-15:47

This is Palm Sunday, the day that people hailed Jesus as “*King of the Jews.*” So, what is Palm Sunday about and do we really want a “King?” Or, do we just want a “Savior? Think carefully about it, because the two are really quite different: a King versus a Savior. A King who “rules” us or a Savior who “saves” us. This is a challenging concept for humanity in general, and especially for inherent anti-royalists, like we Americans. Of course, if you are drowning, you want to be “saved.” But once you’ve been pulled out of the water, do you really want that person to rule the rest of your life? We live in a country where individuals have a measure of control over who governs or rules, and if we don’t like them, we can just vote them out. In fact, *they* “govern” in order to serve *us*—the masses. We do not serve the rulers.

But a King rules by right, not vote. Subjects serve because they must serve, whether they like it or not. They do not get a vote in the matter. I can presume that most people, especially we Americans, would gladly welcome a Savior, but not a King. We don’t want someone telling us what to do, when to do it, and how to do it. After all, we have “rights!” Goodness, look at how people have responded to something as simple as wearing a mask in a global COVID Pandemic!

Today, on Palm Sunday, we hail Jesus as our Triumphant King. But, do we really mean it? Do we really want a “King?” Or do we just want a “Savior? Or, are we just as fickle as those in our Passion reading who had once shouted for joy and welcomed the promised Messiah into their city, and now shout for his crucifixion? Palms of glory juxtaposed with the cross of suffering and shame, which is akin to: “Down with the King, Up with the Savior.”

On Palm Sunday, we begin our journey through Holy Week. When we read the Passion Gospel, we are again faced with the great mystery that the One we Christians name: “*Son of God, true God from true God,*” who willingly submits to and experiences fully the very human reality of death. This is what the week ahead is all about, God in the form of Jesus the Christ entering human existence in such a way that our own existence is transformed. God, who had heretofore been invisible, unreachable, and untouchable comes nearer to creation than anyone could have ever imagined. The Son of God journeys into the human reality of sin, suffering, and death. The Son of God journeys in weakness through the world that had been created by the Word of God’s power, in a mystery that we can never fully comprehend. For this is a mystery that goes against all of our notions about how God is supposed to be and act.

In today’s reading from Paul’s *Letter to the Phillipians*, Paul quotes from a great hymn of the early Church: “*And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.*” [Phil 2:7-8] In this hymn, we hear the mystery and humility of the Incarnation. The one who was “*in the form of God*” did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited. There would be no earthly coronation for the King of Heaven. There would be only the humiliation wrought through divine obedience, an obedience that led to death.

God, who is the Lord and giver of life, goes to death in the form of a servant. Thus, we offer our allegiance to a crucified King who reigns from a throne constructed of the hard wood of the cross. This is a mystery beyond understanding; a mystery that goes against all of our notions

about how God is supposed to be and act. Thus, today we wave palm fronds and celebrate the Messiah's "kingship." Yet, we may also wear crosses that reflect our Messiah's humility.

For, as Christians, we claim Jesus as both: Savior *and* King. We are supposed to be grateful for what has happened in our salvation. More importantly, we are then supposed to follow and obey Lord Jesus as our "King." And that means that our lives are no longer really ours, but His, to do with as our Lord and King desires, which for Americans, is a radical and uncomfortable concept.

Palm Sunday is about accepting the Lordship, the Kingship of Christ. This is not an intellectual exercise but a lived reality. It means always having to make the hard "right choices," because every choice reflects our King and either honors or dishonors him.

What is so ironic? The Jews waving palm fronds 2,000 years ago, they wanted a King, not a Savior. But then again, a true King is also often a Savior—he protects his people, leads them, and, if necessary, dies for them, because he loves them. And his subjects follow, obey, and serve, because they trust in their King's love for them. So, do we want a King or a Savior? I submit to you, that we need both.

"Make your face to shine upon your servant, and in your loving kindness save me." Ps 31:16

What are the implications and meanings for you in today's readings?

1. Today's readings offer a dichotomy of feelings: exuberating yet filled with doom.
 - a. Consider the times in your life when you may have felt these same two extremes. What were they about?
 - b. How did those situations turn out?

2. In his *Letter to the Philippians*, Paul bids the Philippians to: "*let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.*" [2:5]
 - a. Spend some time reflecting on what that phrase means, what it might entail?
 - b. If you could fully embody the "*mind of Christ*," how would that be reflected in your daily life? And, your interactions with others?

3. Spend some time reflecting on Paul's quotation from that early hymn of the Church found in *Philippians 2:6-11*.
 - a. What does this Hymn say about who God is? Based on that, how would you describe God?

For the Biblical Scholars

- In today's Old Testament lesson from Isaiah 50:4-9a, what events have led to this passage?
- In today's Passion narrative from Mark, why were the chief priests and the scribes "*looking for a way to arrest Jesus*"? What specifically had Jesus done to cause such enmity?
- Are the reasons for the hostility coming from the "chief priests & scribes" directed toward Jesus the same or different between the Gospels? If different, How?