

What was it that Jesus saw on that first Palm Sunday?

March 16, 2008

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

Jesus Christ never comes into our lives, or into our society, as an easy guest. He always makes us feel, initially at least, just a little uncomfortable to start with.....and he offers finally the Way of the Cross as the only way to make sense out of life without falsifying reality. Despite the Hosannas we heard in the Liturgy of the Palms, those in Jerusalem were more than a little uncomfortable with this visit and with good reason.

The narrative of the triumphal entry read this morning, for some obscure reason, known only to our Liturgical Commission, ends, in my view, two verses short. The account closes with the crowds saying, “*This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee.*” (Mt. 21:11)

I mention this not to be a *nit* picker. I mention it because the next two verses tell of him entering the Temple, looking around and then driving “*out all who sold and bought in the Temple,*” the money changers and the pigeon sellers (Mt. 21:12). And he told them that “*My house shall be called a house of prayer,*” and they had made it “*a den of robbers*” (Mt. 21:13). The point

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is that the Chief Priests and Scribes saw and heard all of this and *“they were indignant”* (Mt. 21:15). And this too was part of the beginning of the end.

The historic Palm Sunday begins with an obvious bid for popular approval, which turned, in a very short time, into precipitating the cause for the arrest, condemnation and execution of Jesus, as he knew it would. Why? Because he made it the occasion for raising questions which people would rather not face about themselves and their world, When Jesus enters a situation and looks around, the situation seems different than it did before and we're not always ready to accept the change.

What was it that Jesus saw as he looked around at everything on that first Palm Sunday? First of all, he saw a crowd looking for a popular leader with an easy, acceptable, simple answer to life's problems; someone who would remove obstacles for them, someone who would give a lot and demand very little. In historic terms, this meant someone who would re-establish

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Jewish political independence from Rome and, at the same time, guarantee economic prosperity for the people. Almost sounds like what *we* look for in an election year. They greeted him with Hosannas and blessed him, but he met them on different terms. Instead of becoming a popular leader of a mass movement, he directed their attention to the solitary choices all of us must make in the presence of God. Are *my* desires and needs central, or is God's loving purpose central?

Secondly, he saw the Pharisees....the group which had all the answers in advance, before the questions were asked, a group which had reduced the moral pilgrimage to a business of living by the rule book. In his ministry in Galilee, Jesus had already aroused the suspicions of the Pharisees by the way he tried to work with difficult and outcast people. Now he challenged them more directly by suggesting that we cannot eliminate guilt from our hearts by rigid adherence to preconceived moral formulae. We cannot go through penitential exercises that are meaningful without real contrition and the desire to start with a clean slate.

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Our hope is in God's love despite our failures, not in some back of the book perfectionism.

When Jesus entered the Temple on that first Palm Sunday, he saw, thirdly, those who lived by compromise....primarily, the Saducees, the aristocracy that ran the Temple and the Government, for whom religion was a matter of squirting oil on the social bearings of life rather than a business of serious convictions. Jesus challenged these people, too. Our religious faith is either a matter of personal confrontation by the most high God, or it is a sham, a deception and a delusion. When we make it such, may God forgive us.

When Jesus comes here on this Palm Sunday, does he find the same three groups in modern dress? Will he find those looking for easy answers, demanding no thought to speak of and certainly no personal sacrifice? Will he find those who have all the answers already and only want to be confirmed in their prejudices or bias? Or, will he find those for whom the whole

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business of religion and morals is only a calculated act to keep things going and maintain a posture.

Because we have been indoctrinated by twenty centuries of Christian history, we don't condemn Jesus and crucify him. Many try to ignore him instead, or try to domesticate him, or to popularize him, or to adopt those aspects of his being which fit in with life as they want to have it, and simply ignore the rest. Yet, despite all of this, Christ wants us and he won't give up. He wants our loyalty; he wants to win his victory in each of us and through us, our world.

Today we bear our Palms, symbols of a victory yet to come. Our part in this rejoicing is a pledge which we utter in the presence of God and each other, that we intend to have a part in the final triumph when the King will reign in glory everlasting. Christ has assured us that we can attain that end. And, if we want to, we shall.

AMEN.