

WHERE ARE WE IN THE CROWD?

Palm Sunday – April 5, 2009 – Grace Episcopal Church, Haddonfield, NJ

Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close, Rector

The Holy Scriptures from Mark's Gospel that we read today is at the heart of our Bible. This is the Passion Narrative, the foundational story for us Christians. All else in the Gospels is either prologue or epilogue. The richness of this story about Jesus reminds us of the centrality of the cross. We can't get to Easter without going through Good Friday. The two can't be separated.

Why is today both Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday? We have the blessing of the palms and the story of Jesus' entering Jerusalem followed by the story of his arrest, trial and crucifixion. Maybe it is because we want to jump from Jesus' triumphal entry to the glory of the Resurrection. Maybe it's because too few people come to hear the important parts of the story like Maundy Thursday when Jesus gives us the new commandment to love and the sacrament of Holy Communion. Maybe its because too few people come to the Good Friday services and remember the sacrifice that Jesus made for us ... dying on a cross. We miss the central core of the story especially if we miss Good Friday!

It is the death of Jesus that saves us! But we don't handle death very well. We want to skip the pain, the suffering and the dying. We want the joy and happy ending without facing the reality of death. Jesus' last few days are mark by the stark reality of rejection, abandonment, suffering and dying. And yet, it is in Jesus' dying that forgiveness comes to us, that the cross bridges the abyss between God and us. We can't get to Easter without going through Good Friday.

Mark's Gospel is the shortest of the four. Yet in it's shortness, 5 of the 15 chapters are devoted to the Passion of Jesus. We meet a tense situation. Jesus comes across as quiet, pensive and at times withdrawn. He accepts his fate in a way that amazes us! Mark 11 is the prelude to the passion. Jesus comes to Jerusalem to confront and challenge the religion of his day, and its leaders. He comes as Messiah, evoking both hopes and fears! Jesus comes to challenge the power of the Temple and of Rome by providing hope. But in Jesus we see God's saving plan is not ours. This Messiah is not the one many of the people desired.

It's in the crowd that we are challenged today to look, to see who is there and to ask ourselves where we fit in the grand scheme of things. We know about crowds. There was a frenzied crowd at the baseball stadium yesterday for the Phillies second preseason game. There will be an even bigger crowd today for the opening day of the season. The people will be filled with the hope of repeating last season and gaining the title "World Champions" again. Now that's what it means to be filled with expectation!

There was the crowd when Jesus entered Jerusalem. They waved their palm branches like we wave towels or flags at the baseball game! These people had great expectations! They had a vision of a messiah who would come and be the great military, political, religious and economic leader who would bring back the good old days! All their hopes and dreams would be realized! No more Roman soldiers occupying their country! No more being treated as a second rate power in the world! Respect, wealth, status, all this and more would be theirs to have and hold! The crowds are shouting, "Hosanna! Praise God!" There is joy and great expectations!

From there we jump to Mark 14, the heart of the passion narrative. It's here that we see that God becomes like one of us so that we might become like God. But the expectations of the crowd will not be realized. They will reject Jesus, and turn against him. They will become the mad crowd calling for blood and death. Jesus has the power to use it to save himself, but he won't use it. How would we use the

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power that the Son of God has used to heal the sick, raise the dead and announce the coming of the Kingdom of God? Now the crowd turns against Jesus and calls out, “Crucify him!” Where are we in the crowd?

Back in 1957, there was a movie entitled, “A Face in the Crowd.” It starred Andy Griffith before he became Sheriff Andy Taylor. Patricia Neal and Walter Mathieu were also in it. The story talked about a radio comedian, Lonesome Rhodes (Andy) from Arkansas who was making the transition to television. Lonesome gains a slot making advertisements for a new vitamin product. The television people recognize that when Lonesome starts talking, sales and profits zoom up! But the reality is that Lonesome is a coarse, abusive man. His folksy style on the ads covers up the ways he manipulates and treats others poorly. The movie shows us how gullible the public is to a con artist! We crowds are fickle!

This is nothing new in our age. We have Bernie Madoff who conned people out of millions of dollars. We have the Internet and television that seek to play to the crowd. Do you know what the lead story was last night on the news? It was what Michelle Obama was wearing in Europe. Now I like Michelle, but is the most important thing on the news what she wears, or the fact that she put her arm around the queen when they were talking? If that isn’t good enough for you, one of the major stories this morning was that colon cleansing diets are all the rage now. Folks, I need to tell you that God made the colon to cleanse our body ... and we don’t need some special diet to do it. But the news said 27 million people have tried out these diets! We are still being manipulated; by radio and television talk hosts. We are still a gullible crowd.

Towards the end of the movie, “A Face in the Crowd”, there is a scene when Lonesome thinks the audio is off as the commercial concludes. He’s all smiles waving at the camera, but we hear him comment about the audience as idiots, morons, and guinea pigs. The control booth people are fed up with Lonesome’s con, the switch is flicked and the audience hears Lonesome’s remarks on the air! He is both betrayed and revealed! The crowd is shocked!

Today, we are the crowd. We are the face in the crowd confronted with the person of Jesus. We need to ask ourselves, “How do we react to Jesus? Who is he for us?” Let’s look at crowd. Where are we? There’s Judas, the betrayer, who for some reason felt the need for money over Jesus. There is the woman who anoints Jesus feet, who felt deep gratitude and thankfulness. There is Simon the leper who invites Jesus to dinner, who is seeking healing and being part of community again. There is Peter, full of big talk and promises, but will deny Jesus three times. There are disciples who have followed Jesus, and all of them will abandon Jesus when confronted with arrest and death themselves. There is the crowd, fickle to say the least, singing Jesus’ praises one day and calling for him to be crucified the next. Have you seen yourself yet in the crowd? How would Jesus see us ... what face does he see us offering?

There are more people in the crowd. There are the chief priests, threatened and angry at the changes that Jesus is trying to bring. There is Pilate, the Roman governor, curious about Jesus but when pressed by the crowd, he gives in to them. There are the women who follow Jesus, like Mary Magdalene, they will be there at the cross, but powerless and at a distance. There is Barabas, the prisoner, released in Jesus’ place, depending on your politics; he was either a terrorist or a patriot. There is Simon of Cyrene, pressed into service to carry the cross, and yet that encounter will forever change him. There are the soldiers, the men who keep the peace, they mock, torture and abuse Jesus. Finally, there is the centurion,

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a Roman officer, who is moved by the seen and reveals the truth to us, “Surely, this man was the Son of God! Where are we in the crowd?

Palm Sunday, Passion Sunday, challenges us to to ask, “How do we react to Jesus? Who is Jesus for us? A prophet? A con man?” We are the crowd. We go from shouts of Hosanna in one moment to cries of “Crucify him!” Jesus goes to the cross because of God’s love for us. He understands that his mission of love, forgiveness and service will not be understood till much later, after his death. For Jesus, it is not power, or war, or might, or status or popularity that is God’s way ... that is the obsession of the world. Jesus in about God’s way ... and it’s not going to unfold the way we like or want.

As we enter Holy Week and move towards Easter, we are invited to relive the last few days of Jesus’ life. We must answer some questions for ourselves, “Who is Jesus for us? What’s our response? As Jesus comes into our souls, will we accept or reject him?” What decision will we make about him? Will we follow Jesus or leave him behind. We must remember that the way for us is also the way of the cross. We cannot get to our Easter without going through our own Good Friday, but take heart. Jesus has already gone on before us. Come to the heart of the Christian story, Holy Week ... and truly prepare for the celebration of Easter by knowing what sacrifice Jesus has made for us!