

“A Face Like a Flint” CHC 3-29-15

Isaiah 50:5-7

Mark 11:1-11

It was Palm Sunday but, because of a sore throat, 5 year old Sammy stayed home from church with a babysitter. When the family returned home, they were carrying several palm rounds. Sammy inquired what they were for.

His father told him that “People held them over Jesus’ head as he walked by”. “Wouldn’t you just know it”, Sammy complained. “This one Sunday I don’t go to church Jesus shows up” (Homiletics, March-April, 2015, p.34).

Palm Sunday causes us to rethink who God is and what God does. We quickly project our needs, wants, and desires upon political and religious leaders. Certainly someone is out there who can solve our nation’s challenges at home and abroad. A politician or a religious leader steps forward claiming to be that person. If convinced our vote is easily solicited or our spiritual needs are answered.

Ted Cruz, from the chapel of Liberty University, announces that he is officially a candidate for the presidency. He calls people to envision a USA without Obamacare and abortion. He will return us to the constitution and embrace the godly origins of our nation which made us great. Were he to march down the streets of Lynchburg, Virginia, the crowds might raise their version of the waving of palms, cheering loudly.

What do we really think was going on that first Palm Sunday? There appear to be many levels of meaning. How would CNN, MSNBC, or Fox News interpret the news of that day?

Assume that we are one of the many in the crowd. What is going on within us? Don’t we all like to project an image of apparent strength to one another? We like to act as though we are strong and in semi-control of our lives. Inwardly, however, we may feel needy, poor, vulnerable, on the verge of misery, prone to suffer mentally and physically. If you scratch under the skin of many of us this morning you will stumble upon bereavement, affliction, uncertainty, fear, and pain (Abraham Heschel, ‘The Wisdom of Heschel’, pp.69-70).

We've observed and listened closely as Jesus' ministry addresses many of our inner needs and appealed to our outward desires. We've watched him heal people, cast out demons, turn water into wine, take five loaves and the two fish and with them feed five thousand people. We were either there or heard about Jesus raising a man from the dead. Our expectations are soaring. No wonder the religious authorities are threatened. Now who has control over the people's minds and hearts?

Let's not forget the political hype. It is being said that Jesus is a descendent of David and possibly the Messiah we have been waiting for. We are desperate for freedom and deliverance from the Roman occupation. We've watched him take on the injustice and corruption of the political and religious leaders. People are even trying to make him king.

But who Jesus knows himself to be and who the people think he is are two different things. Winston Churchill, after giving a speech to 10,000 people was asked by a friend, "Winston, aren't you impressed that 10,000 people came to hear you speak?" With a quick wit Churchill replied, "Not really. 100,000 would see me hang". Was something like that going on in Jesus' mind?

Jesus is marching to God's drumbeat, not ours, then as well as now. God will not be reduced to our needs, wants, and desires. Prayers and petitions manipulating God to get what we want from God will find return to sender on them.

Underneath the cries of Hosanna lies the dissonance between our perceptions and God's action. Jesus is messing with who we think God is and what God does. What does God want from us? God wants to be loved and known for who God truly is, not some caricature we draw up. Jesus this Holy Week is going to show us the true face and action of God. As Meister Eckhart writes, "God is at home. It is we who have gone for a walk". Jesus is initiating this Palm Sunday the invitation to come home.

What might have been going on in the mind of Jesus that first Palm Sunday? Isaiah offers some insight in the third servant song. Christians have seen in these servant songs from Isaiah a picture being drawn of God's servant fulfilled in Jesus.

Here we enter the mind of the servant. “The Lord has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word....to listen....I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward....I gave my back to those who struck me....I did not hide my face from insult and spitting” (Isa. 50:4-6).

What we observe is a deep humility matched with a deep sense of purpose and trust. “The Lord God helps me, therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like a flint, and I know that I will not be put to shame; he who vindicates me is near” (vs.7). Do we embrace that same humility and trust as we follow God’s purpose and call?

So as Jesus moves through the accolades of the crowd, riding upon that colt, the spiritual forces gathering to face the onslaught of the coming week, Jesus is ready. Only he truly understands what is at stake. He is alone against the crowd, the politicians, and the religious institution.

Some have said that Nelson Mandela had a “face like a flint”. Much like the servant of Isaiah, he was arrested and had to endure harsh punishment. Throughout 28 years in prison the apartheid state of South Africa sought to break him. It did everything in its power to make him admit its superior authority and power. The dynamics were similar to what Jesus faced before Pilate and Caiaphas. Mandela sought to resist them at every turn. The Afrikaaner establishment efforts to shame their most famous prisoner ultimately failed. Instead, shame was reflected back upon them.

Of great importance to Mandela was his awareness that, even in a prison cell, he was part of a larger community. He knew his sufferings were about far more than his own pain and heartache. He knew he was suffering for a higher purpose (Homiletics, Mar.-Ap.’15, p.34).

As psychiatrist Victor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor and author of “Man’s Search for Meaning”, writes, “Those who have a ‘why’ to live, can bear with almost any ‘how’But there was no need to be ashamed of tears, for tears bore witness that a man had the greatest of courage, the courage to suffer”.

In Luke’s account of Palm Sunday, following the ‘Hosannas’ of the crowd, as Jesus comes near and sees Jerusalem, he weeps. Jesus weeps over the lost opportunities God placed before the people, the lack of faith and love, the inability to recognize the time of God’s salvation in their lives.

Jesus “sets his face to go to Jerusalem”, knowing what will befall him. Resisting all attempts to shame him, Jesus remains silent before those asserting that they were the ones who held the power.

What kind of power is at play”? It was in July of 2013. A Muslim school teacher named Soaad Nofol marched daily to ISIS headquarters. She held up messages challenging the behaviors or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria as un-Islamic. We don’t hear much about it, but according to a recent Sojourners magazine report, bold acts of defiance against ISIS are spreading. Media is reporting that many non-violent grassroots initiatives are emerging to challenge the violence. “Civil resistance historically has proven to be twice as effective as armed struggle, even against opponents willing to use mass violence” (Sojourners, April, 2015, p.16).

“Hey King! Where’s your crown, Where’s your Cadillac? I’ve never seen a King before---on a donkey’s back” (Paul Grant and Marion Palmer, Homiletics, p, 36).

Jesus is no Lone Ranger, acting alone. He is aware of his part in the community even as he suffers alone. He knows God is with him and will vindicate him. This alone gives him the strength to fulfill his mission.

Our rootedness in Christ enables us to do the same as we go through our own Gethsemanes. We hear Jesus whispering in our ear, “I am the vine and you are the branches...Abide in me as I abide in you...Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:1-7).

In Mark’s narrative, Jesus continues to the Temple, stops, looks around at everything and “as it was already late, he went to Bethany with the twelve” (vs.11). Put in our idiom, “I’m tired. It’s been a long day. Let’s go home”.

Jesus knows what the week ahead will bring. But he is committed. God is with him and he has “set his face like a flint”.

I hope that Sammy makes it to church next Sunday.