

Easter: A Terrible Thing to Waste

LUKE 19:29-40 (NRSV) *When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, ³⁰saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" ³²So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. ³³As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" ³⁴They said, "The Lord needs it." ³⁵Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. ³⁶As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. ³⁷As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, ³⁸saying,*

*"Blessed is the king
who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven,
and glory in the highest heaven!"*

³⁹Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." ⁴⁰He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

It's a simple narrative, reported by all four gospels. And it moves so easily into our Palm Sunday liturgy: it gives the children an important part in our service. Jesus nears Jerusalem (tradition says it was Passover), and pilgrims have filled the city. Word gets out that Jesus is coming, and crowds gather, spreading their cloaks in his path and waving branches as they shout, "Hosanna! Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord!"

But, questions pop up like dandelions in a spring lawn. For example, in John's Gospel, the crowds "come out" from the city to meet him, because they wanted to see the one who raised Lazarus. The other Gospels don't mention Lazarus. They have the crowds already following Jesus for some time. That difference seems important.

Another question is what the crowds shouted. Three Gospels report that the crowds shouted "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" But, Luke reports, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" Matthew adds, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" Mark adds, "Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is coming!" And John adds, "Blessed is the King of Israel!" Each variation suggests a messianic interpretation, and that's how we traditionally read it.

And yet, from the temptation following his baptism Jesus has rejected the traditional kingly images associated with "Messiah". Three times in the days before this entry into Jerusalem, he predicted passion and death for himself—not the kind of victory suggested by this parade. And then, there's the word, "Hosanna!" It's not a shout of victory, as we might expect in a messianic parade. It means, "Help, now!" It is the cry of one in danger, not a shout of greeting to a triumphant king.

"Hosanna!" is an important word in the liturgy of the Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot), which is in September. And there are other hints that the event took place at "Tabernacles", rather than at "Passover". We assume the people waved

"Palm" branches; but only John mentions palms. Matthew says they "gathered branches from willow trees ". Mark says they gathered "leafy branches from the fields," and refers to the "Lulab" which is a bundle of myrtle and willow branches, with a spray of palm leaves. The Lulab is waved at the Feast of Tabernacles!

Isn't that interesting? But, it's confusing. Did it happen this way or that? Did they say "Hosanna!"? Did they say, "Son of David" or "King of Israel"? Did they wave palm branches or willow branches or the "Lulab"? Was it Passover or Tabernacles? You see, there's a lump in the gravy.

Do you remember the fable of "The King's New Clothes?" A shady character went to a certain king, once upon a time, and told the king he could make him a wardrobe like no one had ever seen. He said he had developed a magical way of spinning gold into thread and weaving it into the most exquisite fabric, from which he could tailor royal vestments that would be envied all over the world. And, he said, as a bonus: due to the magical quality of the clothes, only those who were loyal to the king, and worthy of his kingdom, could see the clothes. Thus, he would be able to weed out those who were disloyal or unworthy.

The king employed the man with much pomp and publicity, and gave him much gold with which to create the new wardrobe. The king was carefully and thoroughly measured, and the tailor locked himself in the royal sewing room. Finally, a day came when the king would ride in the royal carriage through the city to dedicate a statue to himself. The new clothes were ready. The king allowed the tailor to dress him, to the accompaniment of many OOOH's and AHHH's from the royal court; but the king was greatly troubled, because he, himself, could not see the clothes. Was he, the king, unworthy of his own kingdom? With great misgiving, he entered his carriage and began the procession through the city.

Along the procession, admiring comments were heard about the king's fine new clothes. Then, a small boy called out, "But the king is wearing nothing but his underwear!" The whispered message rippled through the crowd until even the king could hear: "The king is wearing nothing but his underwear!"

He had been tricked! The tailor was gone, and so was the gold; and the king had nothing to show for it except the embarrassing memory of a procession down main street, clad only in his Fruit of the Loom!

Perhaps there has been an unwitting conspiracy within the church concerning this so-called "Triumphal Entry"—each member unwilling to admit that he/she cannot see what everyone else *claims* to see until, in our day, every year on Palm Sunday we turn up the volume on the majestic music, and send our children down the center aisle, waving their palms, and lift our voices to sing, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" And so we should! But have we agreed to do it in the

style of a "Grand March!"—a Victory Parade—when it really is a funeral procession?

One characteristic that clearly distinguishes our culture is the denial of death. We avoid the word in conversation, using, euphemisms like, "he passed away", or "she went home to be with the Lord". Our grief process is cluttered with cultural traditions geared to suppress the pain of loss, but which, while they may cushion the immediate impact of the loss, end up effectively prolonging the pain.

Even in the liturgical seasons of the church, death is denied. Many Christians; indeed, entire denominations, go directly from Palm Sunday to Easter. Do not pass go; do not collect \$200.00; and, most important of all, they totally bypass Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, times of suffering and betrayal and decision and commitment and trial and denial and crucifixion. I never heard of Maundy Thursday until I made the move from another denomination to become a Disciple.

I remember a story my teacher told. Years ago, when Easter Lilies could be purchased for \$2.00 each, a congregation began a tradition which has become common in many congregations today: members would buy Easter Lilies for the sanctuary, "in memory of" or "in honor of" loved ones. Members would pay \$5.00, and \$3.00 would go to minister to the poor.

One year, a woman decided it was a waste to leave the lilies in the sanctuary; so, she decided to take one or two of them to friends in local nursing homes. She went to the front of the sanctuary, picked out a particularly beautiful lily, and stooped to pick it up. But, when her hand touched the lily, she drew back in shock. It was plastic! Her cry of dismay attracted the attention of several other worshipers, and in a few moments the church was in an uproar over those plastic lilies.

The pastor explained. Several years earlier the worship committee decided that plastic lilies could be stored from year-to-year, and the entire \$5.00 collected for each lily could go to the poor. "And," he said, with a smile, "plastic is a wonderful symbol of Easter, because it never dies!"

While it was good stewardship, he totally missed the point of Easter. Easter is not about "never dying." Jesus died! Easter is about victory over death!!! Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! But before he can be raised, he must die!

Easter is wasted unless we acknowledge and accept the death of Christ, and move through it, rather than bypass it. You see, without Good Friday, Easter is a hoax, because if Christ is not raised from the dead, Easter is meaningless.

But Christ is raised from the dead; so we can acknowledge the Palm Sunday procession of Jesus as the first act of his Passion. We can acknowledge and accept his death—and ours; because we've read the last chapter. Prayer Slide