

Sunday April 14th, 2019

Palm Sunday

PRAYER: On this Passion and Palm Sunday we recall the shouts of glad hosanna with which the people greeted Jesus. They were ready to hail him as the Christ, but he was not the Christ for whom they were looking. They were looking for a wearer of the purple, but he traded the robes of royalty for the garment of a servant. They were looking for a sword wielding warrior, but he came praising the makers of peace. They were looking for one who would cater to the cries of the high and mighty, but he ministered to the needs of the meek and lowly. Today, O Lord, let us both recall and reclaim the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, lest our shouts of glad hosanna betray the Christ who came. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE: here the Apostle Paul's words when he reminds us to "let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who...being found in human likeness...humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-even death on a cross." As we confess Jesus Christ as Savior, God is just and forgives our sin. Therein lies our assurance.

STEWARDSHIP: The Apostle Paul reminds us today of the depth our Lord Jesus went to win us to himself when he wrote, "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." Let us celebrate the richness we received through the sacrifice of Jesus by the offering of our gifts to honour him. (2 Corinthians 8:9)

PASTORAL PRAYER: Gracious God, our Saviour, we marvel at your presence in Jesus. As we ponder the events that we remember during Holy Week we like to think that, if we had been there, we would have treated you with the respect you so rightly deserved. We like to believe that we would have found majesty in lowliness, greatness in meekness, strength in nonviolence, truth in service and glory in sacrifice. We would like to believe that we would have seen with our eyes, heard with our ears, understood with our hearts and recognized Jesus of Nazareth as the servant of the Lord and the Christ of God. That instead of a crucifixion, there would have been a coronation; and that the triumphant entry would not have been mocked by Good Friday. But we know that the outcome would have been the same. The only difference would be that our names would be recorded instead of the disciples, Jewish leaders and Roman conspirators.

As we recall the events of Holy week, we recall the participation of the main characters with pain and anguish. We have walked in the shoes of each of them. Like Judas, we have put money ahead of loyalty to Christ. Like the disciples in Gethsemane, we have put physical comfort ahead of loyalty to Christ. Like the chief priests, we have put inherited beliefs ahead of loyalty to Christ. Like Peter in the courtyard we have put self-interest ahead of loyalty to Christ. Like Pontius Pilate, we have put public pressure ahead of loyalty to Christ. We have not mocked Christ, by crowning him with thorns. Instead we have mocked his call to pick up our crosses and follow him, but turning and walking away.

We beg your forgiveness, O God, for our presence in the company of those who mocked your Son. Yet we are more embarrassed by our absence from the company of those who remained loyal to Christ. After Calvary, those who abandoned Jesus in the garden ended up dying for their sake of loyalty to Jesus. So did the Apostle Paul. As have thousands more who have followed you -risking honour, fortune, reputation, health, and life itself for the sake of the will and the claim of Jesus Christ. We ask your forgiveness, dear Lord, for our failure to follow in their footsteps. We pray for courage that we might relieve Simon the Cyrene of the burden of having to bear the cross of Jesus alone.

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We pray, O God, that the light that brightened the path of Calvary will illumine our path. Let it not only lead us to do as Jesus did, but let also lead others to join us in making the mission of Jesus their mission. Let us hear our Lord say to them and to us, upon observing our common response to the hungry, the naked, the imprisoned, the sick, the homeless, the aged, and the oppressed, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me.”

We recall, O Lord, the prayer of Jesus to be spared the cup of agony, but he put your will before his prayer. Let us dare to repeat that prayer, but let us not refuse the cup of agony if you were to ask us to drink it.

BENEDICTION: This day reminds us of the worst and the best we see when we look in the mirror. On the one hand, we see the selfishness, the fear, the greed, and the cowardice that made Calvary inevitable. On the other hand, we see the selflessness, the confidence, the grace and the courage that made Calvary possible. As we praise the One who hung on the cross, let us not spurn the path that led him there. Amen.

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Luke 19:28-40

“The Stones Do Not Lie”.

Let us play a bit of a guessing game today and see if you can figure out what is the thing I am describing. The item I am thinking about is used about four hundred billion times a year worldwide and its use is still growing. In the United States alone it represents a nineteen-billion-dollar industry and only oil represents a larger import value than this item. It is something we consume by taking it into our bodies and health experts, through medical studies, and despite what my dear wife thinks, have proven its positive effects on the human body.

Currently, researchers tell us that this product delivers more antioxidants to our diet than fruit, vegetables, and nuts. There is medical evidence that it reduces your chances of getting Parkinson’s disease, liver and colon cancer, cirrhosis of the liver, Type 2 diabetes, and as a bonus it improves male fertility. Recently it was reported that in a freeze-dried state it is also an excellent source of fiber, and it taste better than prunes. It can also, surprisingly, protect you from skin cancer, but you have to spread it on your skin for it to work this way.

This product has an impressive chemical makeup of over four thousand distinct chemical components, and if you add water and cream and sugar the number jumps to over a thousand more. Do you know what I am describing? It is of course coffee, which many of you have already enjoyed today. Coffee, the wonderful nectar, served in a variety of ways. and in a myriad of places.

Double doubles, lattes, ice caps, and espresso, are all available at hundreds of locations in Norfolk alone. What is your favourite way to enjoy this wonder elixir? Where is the best place to buy it? Even right now some of you are thinking, gee a cup of Joe would go great right about now; maybe some espresso to fight off the grogginess.

But how many of you avid drinkers of the bean nectar, have ever enjoyed a variety of coffee called Kopi Luwak? Surprisingly it is the special coffee that is mentioned in a scene of the movie “The Bucket List”. (See Leonard Sweet, Gospel according to Starbucks) Kopi Luwak is the most expensive coffee in the world as it costs about 300 American dollars a pound or \$740 a kilogram.

Often, in specialty shops, brewed Kopi Luwak is sold not by the cup, but by the ounce. One brewed cup of this stuff can go for as high as \$50. That is because only about one thousand pounds of this coffee make to the world market every year. It is very rare. Kopi Luwak coffee comes from only one place on earth; the island of Sumatra, in Indonesia, in the region, appropriately enough, called Java.

I’ve been told, because I can’t afford to buy any of it, that it has a chocolate aroma, with a nutty bold taste. Intrigued? You might even love to try some of this exotic stuff, until I tell you a little more about its origins. The word *kopi* is the Indonesian word for coffee. *Luwak* is the Indonesian word for cat.

Luwak actually refers to a palm civet cat that is intimately involved in the process of harvesting this exotic bean.

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A Luwak is about the size of a fox, and is a nocturnal, fruit eating cousin of the mongoose. The Luwak, though, is the Juan Valdez of the animal world. Luwaks roam the island of Sumatra looking for the most perfect, ripe coffee cherries to eat. In fact, a Luwak would rather starve to death, than eat inferior coffee cherries. The Luwak eats the best coffee bean cherries and then nature takes its course.

The Luwak's stomach can digest the outer fruit covering of the coffee cherry, but it eliminates the undigested beans. Yes, you guessed it. Local harvesters then, scour the rainforest floors looking for these undigested beans, which are then cleaned, and dried, and of course made into coffee. Kopi Luwak has another name, but I cannot use it in polite company. When I think about Kopi Luwak I am truly amazed at how God works?

What in reality is garbage, or some kind of animal waste, is somehow turned into a very valuable commodity. You see similar things in nature all the time. What actually is honey; that delightful nectar of nature. Well it is nothing else than bee spit. I really like mushrooms in all kinds of forms, and in all kinds of dishes. I still like and want them despite knowing what material some mushrooms actually grow in.

When grapes are pressed into juice for wine making, or barley fermented to make beer, the fermentation process is actually yeast eating the sugar and then giving off its waste. Then there is the dove, that beloved Christian image. A dove, however, is just a poetic name for that trash eating bird called a pigeon that causes no end of headaches to apartment dwellers in town and yet God used it as a symbol of the Holy Spirit.

Then there is Jesus who grew up in a backwater place called Nazareth. Nathaniel said of Jesus, "Can anything good come from there." And let us not forget where Jesus was born; in a stable. Think about that for a moment. What actually goes on in a stable or a barn? I've worked in barns and it can be an affront to the nose. Imagine what were Jesus' first smells when he entered life; animal waste.

Then there is Jesus' death. He was crucified at a place called Golgotha, which was the garbage dump for Jerusalem. Jesus died smelling garbage. Now I know you are perhaps uncomfortable with these images, and that is a good thing. Because the first thing we need to know about how God works, is that he takes life and he turns it upside down. What we think is important or valuable, he rejects; and he takes what we reject, and makes it invaluable.

Time and time again, the scriptures tell us that what the world thinks is weak, most despised, and most contemptible in your life and mine, can become, through the power of the Holy Spirit, what is most beautiful and most radiant, and what can produce the most blessing. God can turn trash into treasure just like a palm civet's waste can be turned into the world's most valuable coffee. God loves to take this world and turn it upside down.

If you don't believe me, turn to 1 Corinthians chapter 1 and begin reading at verse 18. Here is some of what Paul writes. "I know very well how foolish the message of the cross sounds to those who are on the road to destruction. But we who are being saved recognize this message as the very power of God.

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As the scriptures say, ‘I will destroy human wisdom and discard their most brilliant ideas.’”

If you want to be first, you must be willing to be last. If you want to be strong, you have to be willing to be weak. If you want to win, you have to want to lose. That is what this whole Holy Week is all about. It is about Jesus demonstrating what God’s values are, and quite often those values are clearly at odds with the world. And nowhere is this truth more powerfully demonstrated than when Jesus enters Jerusalem.

For approximately three years, Jesus had traveled the countryside teaching, meeting people and most impressively; performing many miracles. In many very overt ways, Jesus demonstrated that he was the Messiah. The miracles, the symbols, and the predictions: all pointed to the fact that he was the one Israel had been looking for.

Opinion though on Jesus was mixed, partly because of his background; he was frequently reminded that he was a Nazarene and the son of a carpenter, but a significant number of people began to believe he was the chosen one. The blind who regained their sight, the lame that walked again, the lepers who were cleansed and most recently Lazarus rising from the dead, all screamed that indeed Jesus was the Messiah.

As the Passover, one of the highest and most significant of all Jewish religious and national holidays drew closer, expectations hit a new high. Now would be the very best opportunity for Jesus the Messiah, to make his intentions known. But what exactly were those intentions? Common belief and expectation said that the Messiah would bless Israel by driving out their oppressors.

People in Jesus’ day commonly held that the Messiah was a military leader. In fact, some of the disciples believed this to be true, as we see when Peter cut off the high priest’s slave’s ear in the garden. Many other ears were inclined to Jesus just waiting for him to announce to the people, “Take up your swords. Drive the awful Romans from the land.” I should also tell you that many scholars believe that this desire to see a military move by Jesus, may have been the motivation behind Judas’ betrayal.

Some have speculated that Judas betrayed Jesus to force his hand. “Surely”, Judas may have thought, “when the soldiers come for him, he will call his people to arms”. Yet, as I said, God’s ways and our ways are always, it seems, at odds with each other. As the crowds longed for a military leader, Jesus chooses to enter the holy city riding on a what; a white charger like some conquering general? No, he rides in on a small donkey. Why?

Historically, when a king came to a neighbouring kingdom, or to one of his cities, if he wanted to demonstrate peace he came, riding not on a horse, but on a donkey. Donkeys are symbols of peace. Imagine what would have happened if Jesus had come in on a horse. How far do you think the Romans would have let him travel? Yes, Jesus is the Messiah, he is the King of kings, but he comes to bring peace, not war.

The Israelites believed their salvation and their hope would come from the point of a sword; would come from military strength.

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What Jesus demonstrated was so unexpected that when he is arrested, lashed and humiliated: the crowds that cheered his coming abandon him, and even called for his death. They see Jesus as so far from the mark, as to what they thought a Messiah should be, that they reject him.

Let us go back to the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians again, “God’s ways seem foolish to the Jews because they want a sign from heaven to prove it is true. And it is foolish to the Greeks because they believe only what agrees with their own wisdom. So, we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended, and the Gentiles say it is all nonsense.” (1:22-23)

Just look at how confused Pilate in John chapter 18 is, when he investigates Jesus. “Are you the king of the Jews?” Jesus replied, “Is this your own question, or did others tell you about me? Am I a Jew?” Pilate asked. “Your own people and their leading priests brought you here. Why? What have you done?”

Jesus answered, “I am not an earthly king. If I were, my followers would have fought when I was arrested by the Jewish leaders. But my kingdom is not of this world.” Pilate replied, “You are a king then?” Jesus said, “You say that I am a king, and you are right. I was born for that purpose. And I came into the world to bring truth to the world. All who love the truth recognize that what I say is true.” “What is truth?” Pilate asked.

We continue to echo Pilate’s question, two thousand years later. We see how the world works, with its hunger for power and influence, and we see how Jesus rides in on a donkey and we wonder just how sensible his approach is. Couldn’t God have just forced us all into believing in him?

Couldn’t he have used some sort of cosmic bullhorn to shout the truth into our hearts? Instead, we read of a procession on a donkey, and of a crucifixion, and we think, “How offensive and how nonsensical? It makes so little sense. It is not how the world works and certainly not what attracts the world to want to follow anyone. No wonder the Pharisees objected to the crowd’s praise of Jesus.”

“This isn’t what we want. This isn’t who we want. Stop shouting and stop praising him.” They even went so far as to ask Jesus himself to stop the celebration. It was as if they were saying to Jesus, “Even you must see how ridiculous this parade is. You must be aware you cannot be the Messiah because you are not what we want or expect.” But the Pharisees were not the arbiters of truth. Even if the disciples remained silent the very stones beneath their feet would cry out.

For the next seven days we will relive how God turned our world upside down. How God took what seemingly was a monumental failure, namely Jesus’ crucifixion, and turned it into the greatest victory of all. How God took the humiliation of Christ and turned it into a blessing. Most of all, we will see how God took the curse of hanging on a tree and transformed it into the miraculous act of forgiveness and salvation.

“Remember, dear brothers and sisters”, Paul writes, “that few of you are wise in the world’s eyes, or powerful, or wealthy when God called you. Instead, God deliberately chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise.

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And he chose those who are powerless to shame those who are powerful. God chose things despised by the world; things counted on as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important, so that no one can ever boast in the presence of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:26-29)

God has turned this world upside down. He has shaken everything we think we know, in order to redeem what we thought was lost, and to give value to what we may consider worthless, namely our very selves. Hopefully, this Palm Sunday has given you something to “percolate” on as you journey to God.