

Sunday March 28th, 2021
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.

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.

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."

Sunday March 28th, 2021
Palm Sunday

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 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.

Sunday March 28th, 2021

Palm Sunday

John 12:12-19

“Who is the Fool Now?”

This is not a Father’s Day message, but I was thinking about my Father this week. My dad is a wonderful man. Very kind, loyal, and has a good sense of humour even if it is often unintentional. However, at the risk of embarrassing him, I share that there is one thing about him most people do not know. My Dad is very particular about his recycling. Every week, he spends an enormous amount of time arranging the blue box to prepare for pick up. The paper and cans etc. are neatly arranged, not just thrown in.

My mother remarked one day that his obsession with the blue box was thoroughly unnecessary. The collectors could care not one wit about how his blue box looked. However, mom spoke too soon. Not long after mom’s comment, dad happened to be at the curb when the recycling truck came around. The collector asked my dad, “Is that your blue box?” Dad of course said that it was.

The collector then stated that my dad had the best blue box in the city. Well, there was no critiquing his recycling efforts now. I am afraid I do not take after my dad. I do separate the paper from other stuff, but it is hardly considered neat. I am however, a huge fan of all the blue box activity we can undertake.

Recycling, I’ve decided, is besides being environmentally sound, is frugality at its best. It makes sense to reduce, reuse, and recycle as much as we can. As a group of people, farmers may be the best recyclers around, having tried to reuse things hundreds of years before it was fashionable, or necessary for the rest of us. Case in point is the following experience I had.

Some of you may remember that for nine years of my life I was a farmer. Along with Laura, we ran a Christmas tree farm in Selkirk, right down the road from the Provincial Park. We had greenhouses for annual flowers, and I also spent time cultivating and selling nursery stock. As part of what we did, I have vivid memories of cleaning out our manure pit (a fun job to be sure), trimming trees, mowing the rows between the trees, and my least favourite thing, spraying pesticide.

Actually, for the last couple of years I gave up the spraying, because it was so harmful, both to wildlife and to myself. In Ontario, to buy and use agricultural pesticides and herbicides, you must be licensed, and as part of that licensing process, you had to take a course and write an exam. This process had to be repeated every five years and I undertook it twice. The problem with pesticides, besides the obvious chemical danger in handling and application, is what you do with the empty containers that once held pesticides.

At some farms, the number of empty containers can be significant, and you cannot just throw them into your regular garbage. Most retailers, who sold the pesticides, were required by law to take them back, but what can they do with them? No matter how much you rinse them out, they will still have residual pesticide locked in the plastic.

Sunday March 28th, 2021
Palm Sunday

During my second run through the course and test, we were given a demonstration of one innovative solution to the problem of waste containers.

Into the classroom, our instructor brought a nine-inch-long cylinder, that was mostly grey in colour, but had several flecks of other colours. The instructor explained that this cylinder was a small sample of a longer fence post. Perhaps you have seen in rural areas or even down at many parks, farm fence posts. Usually, they are wooden, but in this case, our instructor showed us one made of compressed, recycled plastic from pesticide jugs.

I had to admit that I was impressed. It was simply ingenious; to use a waste product to make something so useful, and in this case, something that would last considerably longer than the traditional wooden posts. I am really intrigued with people who can take something we throw away, and make it into something useful and even desirable. Actually, I think we all admire this; otherwise we would not take to recycling so well.

I wish I could come up with an idea to take what is garbage, or some kind of waste and somehow turned into a valuable commodity. You see similar things in nature all the time. What actually is honey; that delightful nectar of nature. Well it is nothing other than bee spit. I just love mushrooms in all kinds of forms, and in all kinds of dishes. I still love them despite knowing what material mushrooms actually grow in.

When grapes are pressed into juice for wine making, 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 bird called a pigeon, that causes no end of headaches to apartment dwellers in this town, and yet God used it as a symbol of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus himself grew up in a trash place called Nazareth. Nathaniel said of Jesus, "Can anything good come from there." And let us not forget where Jesus was born? Not in a sterile hospital, or even in a nice room in a house, but in a stable. What actually goes on in a stable of a barn? I know, because I used to try and manage the results of a barn. 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 empty pesticide containers can be turned into useful fence posts. God loves to take this world and turn it upside down.

Sunday March 28th, 2021
Palm Sunday

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. 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.

As we know, 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, the predictions, all pointed to the fact that he was the one Israel had been looking for.

Opinion on Jesus were mixed, partly because of his background. He was reminded often 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, 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, among the people of Israel in Jesus' day, said that the Messiah would bless Israel by driving out their oppressors. In other words, people in Jesus' day, commonly held that the Messiah was a military leader. A whole group of angry young men arose in Israel, called Zealots, who took to trying to overthrow Rome's rule. It is interesting to note that Barabbas, the one the Jews chose over Jesus, was likely a zealot, caught after attacking Roman soldiers.

In fact, some of the disciples believed the zealot's cause 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?

Sunday March 28th, 2021
Palm Sunday

Historically, when a king came to a neighbouring kingdom or to one of his cities, if he wanted to demonstrate peace, he come 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. What Jesus demonstrated was so unexpected that when he is arrested, and lashed, and humiliated, the crowds that cheered his coming abandon him and even call 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.” In fact they 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.

Sunday March 28th, 2021
Palm Sunday

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. 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 helped you recycle your thinking about who Jesus is and what he stands for as you journey to Good Friday and Easter Morning.