

Palm/Passion: The Crown and the Cross

If you follow the revised common lectionary with its suggested texts when preparing for a worship service, the calendar itself gives away that the church has become conflicted about this day in the life of the church. There are two sets of texts; one labeled Palm, one Passion. So the first thing I needed to decide is today a day we celebrate the triumphal entry or look ahead to the Passion of Christ. When looking at the Scripture selections for this Sunday, I have to face the reality that the church has given into the pressure of the world. There is an admission that we as the body of Christ no longer want to spend our time in “special services”, we want to compress the entirety of Holy Week into one day—we want to go from the triumphant entry to the glorious resurrection without spending too much time in the middle of that week—in the consideration of the Passion of Christ where the narration is about betrayal, about desertion of those closest friends, of suffering, of feeling abandoned, and finally of death in the most shameful and humiliating circumstances those in power could devise. I have often quoted the poet Ann Weems. In one of her poems she writes that the cross was present in the cradle—and we know that—we know that the birth—the incarnation’s purpose was for our redemption—but we don’t like to consider it too carefully. We avoid reflecting on the cost of our redemption. We like celebrations and parades—perhaps that is why Palm Sunday is so much more appealing to us—the image of little children shouting Hosanna as words of praise. Yet in the entry Jesus made into Jerusalem there are hints in the Biblical narrative that we may have magnified or glorified the event. Jesus did not enter the city by the main gate, the one used by Romans and conquerors. Instead he came in a side gate—crossing the Sidon valley from Mount Olivet. This entrance was near the Temple but was not the one of importance in a nation under the control of Rome. Jerusalem was crowded with the influx of pilgrims come to celebrate Passover in the Holy City. Jesus enters riding on a donkey which traditionally is related to an earlier prophet Zachariah who said “Tell the daughter of Zion, Look your king is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey.” This was certainly a humble mount in contrast to how the Romans entered with their horse drawn chariots, but there is not mention of children in the crowd. There is indeed a crowd, a large crowd described some of whom are throwing their cloaks on the road while others were shouting “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” We often interpret this as a coronation—an acknowledgement of Jesus as King. But in doing this, we don’t translate the word Hosanna. We assume this is a shout of praise—a celebratory shout. But in both Greek and Hebrew, the meaning of the word is rescue. The crowd is shouting: Rescue us! They are looking at this man as a prophet-king who as being God’s representative will free them. They are seeking freedom from Roman rule—and never realize that Jesus has come to do just that—rescue them and restore humanity’s relationship with God. The Gospel accounts vary in some of the details about what happens after the entry, but Jesus is said to spend most of the week in the Temple courtyards—teaching crowds who gather around him and answering questions put to him by the priests, Pharisees and Sadducees. They are seeking to find some way to trap him, but cannot find fault with his answers and are afraid of his popularity with the crowds. While they are debating this dilemma, they are approached by one of Jesus’ chosen disciples—Judas Iscariot. When Judas comes to them he does so with a question: “What will

you give me if I betray him to you?” There is no mistaking the intent in this question. Judas is willing to betray Jesus with the motivation being selfish gain. This same question appears again and again in our current context in a slightly different format: What is in it for me? This question seems to govern the actions of a wide spectrum within our society...and yes, if we are truthful, the motivation there guides much of our own actions. What will I get? How will I benefit? This is how the Passion narrative begins. What will you give me? Sometimes when we read a passage we are familiar with, it is easy to overlook details, but Jill Duffield editor of the Outlook Magazine pointed out that this is not the only question Judas asked during the Passion narrative. At the meal where the disciples are gathered to celebrate the Passover, when Jesus announces that one of them will betray him—all the disciples and Judas ask what seems to be the same question—but not quite. The disciples as a group are said to respond: “Surely not I, Lord?” , but Judas is reported as saying: “Surely not I, Rabbi?” All but Judas refer to Jesus as Lord, while Judas calls him Rabbi—surely an honorable title, but no matter how beloved a teacher may be—the one we call Lord is so much more. Rabbi is what Judas will call Jesus in the garden as he betrays him. As we consider this difference is how Judas viewed Jesus, perhaps it sheds light on our relationship with him. Do we view Jesus as our teacher of righteous ways, our model for ethical behavior—or do we recognize him as Lord—as the one to whom we owe obedience and so much more? What images do we most use in our personal prayers, in our favorite hymns and Biblical texts? Do we most often view Jesus Christ as our Teacher, Master, Friend, Shepherd, Savior, Lord? These are all frequent images found in our Scriptures. How do these images we choose reflect the relationship we have with Christ? As we consider the passion narrative, there is one more question which seems to me present, although unspoken in the text. That question is one which God has asked throughout all of Scripture: “What do I need to give for you?” The text for Passion Sunday point to a God who asked, not matter what the cost, what do I need to give for you to turn to me? Jesus answered the question of what God is willing to do to redeem us—to provide for our rescue as the crowds shouted on Palm Sunday. The answer came on what we call either Good Friday or Black Friday. Black because at Jesus’ death the earth became dark; Good because of the extreme self-giving of Jesus which redeems us. So we enter this Holy Week on a note indicative of a crown, we will end it at the cross. The question we need to ask ourselves this Holy Week is not the one Judas asked: What will you give me?; but in light of what Jesus gave, we should be asking: “What, Lord, can I give you?” In speaking of our tendency to go from triumphant entry on earth to glorious resurrection without pause Ann Weems wrote these words: “Holy is the week...Holy consecrated, belonging to God...We move from Hosannas to horror with the predictable ease of those who know not what they do. And on that darkest of days, each of us must stand beneath the tree and watch the dying if we are to be there when the stone is rolled away. The only road to Easter morning is through the unrelenting shadows of that Friday. Only then will the alleluias be sung; only then will the dancing begin.ⁱ It is truly in the darkness of that Friday that we see most clearly God’s redemptive love, the amazing grace which seeks us out at great cost. In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

ⁱ Ann Weems, Holy Week. Kneeling in Jerusalem: Poetry for Lent and Easter. Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville, KY (1993). Pg. 73.