

The Question for Today

When I was growing up this Sunday was accompanied by the handing out of palm branches for the children and youth to wave as they marched around the sanctuary and the hymn Hosanna, Lord Hosannas was sung as the opening hymn for the service. I'm sure that is still happening in many churches this morning. There was only one designation for the day...it was Palm Sunday and the topic was the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem that day. Rocky River, like most southern churches did not observe Lent as that was considered something related to Catholicism...which many folks weren't sure was Christian. There was nothing strange about going from one joyous celebration to another on Easter Sunday morning with the celebration of the resurrection. That Christ arose was the dominant theme with little thought being given to the painful death on the cross...sort of like because he arose that death could be ignored. Yet that Jesus was born and lived among us to fulfill God's vision for the world God created is essential to our understanding of our God and ourselves. Ignoring that the grace in which we stand in the words of the Apostle Paul that there was a cost to be paid for that gift of free grace we obtained through God's mercy: that cost was the death of the man Jesus who was also fully divine. So the question for today centers on that question which arises from the current dual designation of this day as Palm, Passion Sunday. This Sunday marks our observance of what is termed Holy Week; the events described in the scriptures signaled the beginning of the end for Jesus. Matthew's gospel begins with a festive procession. Yet the end of the week featured an arrest and trial which by the Friday which we call either Good Friday or Black Friday ended with the death penalty. Those excited children described in the Temple courtyard waving palm branches gave way to violent mobs shouting death threats seeking his crucifixion. Adoration by the crowds in Jerusalem evaporated into what seemed like abandonment by God on Golgotha. Between that entry and the events that ended the week, Jesus' disciples argued among them about who was the greatest, Judas betrayed him and then according to one account committed suicide. Peter denied ever knowing him, and all his disciples fled for the high grass (except for the women). After three years of itinerant preaching, teaching and healing that focused on the poor, the imprisoned, the blind, and all who were oppressed while he called for repentance and proclaimed God's reign drawing near, Jesus' family has declared him insane, the religious establishment hated him, and the political authorities fearing the power he had and the message he proclaimed had had enough. And so Rome and the religious establishment deployed all the brutal means at its disposal to crush an insurgent movement through rendition, interrogation, torture, mockery, humiliation and then a sadistic execution designed as a "calculated social deterrent" to any other troublemakers who might seek to challenge or upset the *status quo*. In the eyes of those in charge Jesus was seeking to subvert their power and status. The conclusion they reached was doing what Jesus called for to bring God's reign into the world couldn't be done without great changes in how everything was done according to Caesar's ways. What our text describes as Jesus' "triumphal entry" into the clogged streets of Jerusalem was a well-planned, deeply ironic, highly symbolic, and deliberately provocative act. Jesus sent two disciples to bring him a donkey which would be found tied at a certain place. He was recreating an image from a prophet which foretold their king would arrive humble and mounted on a donkey. This entrance was an enacted parable or street theater that dramatized his subversive mission and message. He didn't ride a donkey because he was too tired to walk

or because he wanted a good view of the crowds. An Oxford scholar George Caird characterized this entry as more of a “planned political demonstration” than the religious celebration that we have sentimentalized it into today. Jesus’ entrance highlighted the possibility of the kingdom he was proclaiming as validated by the prophets of old. Jesus’ message has urged the creation of an alternate reign and rule. The reign he proposes, God’s reign, subverts major aspects of the way most societies in history have been organized. Whether ancient or modern, most societies have normalized a status quo of political oppression that marginalizes ordinary people, economic exploitation through which the rich and powerful take advantage of the poor, often using religious legitimation that says “don’t try to change things because God wants things this way.” Looking around our current world situations it is easy to spot many ways in which the way things are, are not like what Jesus told us was God’s vision for the world. There are too many folks who are marginalized within our ways of doing business; things like the stereotypes we apply to all those who are different, the fear and hatred we allow to govern our ways of doing things. Things that routinely demonstrate to us that our ways do no bring God’s reign near. As we contemplate the events coming this week, we can look at the procession Jesus staged as Jesus’ invitation to us to join his subversive counter-procession that leads to the creation of a sort of parallel universe. This invitation given to us is not to just any subversion or to subversion for its own sake or to move on to some new and improved political agenda created in an image of this world. It is an invitation to join him in the creation of a new creation; one where God’s reign and God’s ways do rule. It is a call to a type of dying—the dying to self and the many demons created by egotism so that we become more like our Lord. In our world where we recognize few things outside of self-interest, it often proves to be radically subversive to advance a policy or program which puts forth the proposition that we should live to serve others. Paul’s letter to the Philippians urged those early believers to “have the mind of Christ”, the mind that sought to ensure the welfare of others over self. It is Jesus’ purpose to teach us that the welfare of all is the mission which Jesus asks us to pursue. When we read all the things Jesus has done as he wandered toward Jerusalem we can forget that underneath it all was Jesus’ mission to proclaim God’s reign near. The Passion portion of this story is to remember that bringing God’s ways into the current situation even in Galilee and a conquered Judea was his passion. His call to repent because God’s kingdom was near was not going to go over well with those presently in power. His purpose was not to suffer and die, but to proclaim God’s reign as possible then and there. When given the choice to remain loyal to God or suffer, Jesus chose loyalty to God. This led to the cross because the Romans and those in authority were not just trying to kill the person through this painful and humiliating process; they were intending to kill what the person stood for. They were killing any reputation that the person might have had. They were killing any possibility that anyone would remain loyal. They were killing any reputation the person might have had. They were killing any possible future. They were killing the hope of the rescue that was asked for by those shouting crowds as Jesus entered at the beginning of the week. But God had other plans. God did not intend to let the world’s ways end the mission given to Jesus. And so, although Jesus’ entry marked the beginning of the end for Jesus, his end showed the way for our own beginning. This text presents us with many questions, one of them is asked by Judas in the opening verse selected for today: “What will you give me if I betray him to you?” The question Judas asked is unambiguous: What will you give me? This is a question which

underlies many of our interactions. Judas is on a mission of betrayal with the root motivation being a selfish fixation on what he can gain. What is in it for me? This is often our approach to all things in our lives. One commentary I read suggested that this orientation could be another definition of sin: the seeking personal gain no matter the cost to another. Sometimes I ponder this question: Why does so much of our focus on Jesus revolve around our personal status, on what we gain through Jesus? We perhaps should focus instead on what we should give in return for the amazing grace we have received and seek to join in participating in Christ's message of proclaiming God's kingdom near and then working to live according to what Jesus' ministry declared that would mean in the way the world treated all. For Jesus' mission was to redeem the world. So at the end there is no choice between Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday for Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem showed his Passion for God's vision and when we wave our palms or shout Hosanna, it is in knowing that Jesus did indeed provide for our rescue. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.