

Passion Sunday-March 16, 2008  
Galilee Church  
A sermon by the Rev. Dr. James B. Magness

The Liturgy of the Palms  
Matthew 21:1-11  
Psalm 118:19-29

The Liturgy of the Word  
Isaiah 45:21-25  
Psalm 22:1-11  
Philippians 2:5-11  
Matthew 26:36-27:66

"When (Jesus) entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?' The crowds were saying 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.'" (Matthew 21:11)

## INTRODUCTION

Turmoil; I don't think that very many of us like to dwell in turmoil. However, there are some people I know whose lives are so chaotic that they all they know in life is the turmoil and disorder they experience day in and day out. If any of you grew up in a dysfunctional families influenced by drugs, alcohol or various other types of abuse, you know just what I mean. Turmoil and chaos, emotional siblings to secret keeping and lie telling are constant, though unwelcome companions.

If any of you have gone through a bad marriage that went on too long, you know what I mean. When love goes out the door from a marriage, tolerance is certain to depart soon thereafter.

In the scriptures there is another type of turmoil. That is the turmoil, disorder, confusion, and havoc that happen when Jesus steps into the life of a non-believer. The truth that sets a person free, as the bible calls it, may also be quite unsettling at first. Every time an Alpha Course is held, there are persons in the course who are in contact with this type of turmoil. Many of you know what happens when the reality and genuineness of the Christ's gospel comes into contact with your not so perfect lives. The gospel stories tell us that when persons became followers of Jesus, that their family members even turned their back on them.

On the back of a donkey Jesus rode into the lives of the people who lived in a small town known as Bethpage right outside of Jerusalem. When he did, some people loved Jesus. It was like a combination of the "March Madness" of the Middle East and the Shamrock Marathon on the streets of Virginia Beach. Jesus presence was like an

intoxicant to many people. The atmosphere was one of celebration – maybe even of a party. Some apparently likened the entry of Jesus to the coronation of a king.

Yet, not everyone was overwhelmingly joyful at the thought of Jesus. To these others Jesus' presence was enough to make their blood boil. Those others were the Jewish leaders in the community. They didn't trust Jesus, and quite frankly, didn't think that they needed him. Jesus was trouble with a capital "T". They would do anything they could to charge and convict Jesus of a crime, any crime, just to get rid of him.

They were quite happy to trump up some charges against Jesus and have him killed. By the way, that is what you do if you're a zealous nationalist whose main goal in life is to bring back the glory days of Israel. The Jewish leaders knew Jesus would keep them from their goal. Jesus was doing things that were down right damaging to their central program or rebuilding the image of Israel.

It was this type of concern from the Jewish leaders that would ultimately lead to the death of Jesus. They trumped up some charges and sought to bring about their version of "justice."

Hmm? Justice?

I sometimes wonder if the authorities who critical of Jesus would have tried to bust me for the same things Jesus was accused of doing? I have hope that every now or then I would have been convictable. You see, actually it is a good thing to get caught in the act of doing the so-called bad things that Jesus did. This is the point at which Jesus' followers depart from the ways of the culture in which we live. This is the point at which we are neither Republicans nor Democrats; neither black nor white; neither Roman Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran nor Episcopalian. We are followers of Jesus. Jesus is the great leveler in society.

Followers of Jesus are distinct and different, and always have been distinct and different, especially from the other religions in the world. Think about it for a moment:

Confucius left us his Classics.  
Buddha left us with his mysticism.  
Mohammed left us the Koran.

But Jesus left us with none of these: no books or philosophies were written; no code for living. Jesus left something else.

Jesus left us his disciples. Each one of us by virtue of our baptism, is a direct descendent of those disciples. Because I am a disciple, I want to do the things Jesus did, even if some do call it blasphemy.

I can hear Jesus' critics standing at the back of the crowd and getting worked up about him:

"This guy Jesus is not and will not do us any good. Israel has got to be restored as a great nation again, and Jesus can't take us there. He is nothing more than a drain on our energy. Maybe we can get rid of him. Yea, maybe we can. After all he comes close to saying that he and his 'father,' whatever that means, are one and the same. Now tell me, what kind of talk is that! He even likens himself to the messiah. Jesus, we know about the messiah, and you're no messiah. "We ALL know that."

That indeed is the face of people overcome by their own sense of righteousness. Jesus had to contend with the self-righteous Jewish leaders who badly wanted a messiah – a savior – but their messiah had to be special and v-e-r-y political. The Jewish leaders who opposed Jesus embraced a messiah with nationalistic and political overtones, overtones which Jesus never encouraged. When Jesus' hearers on the street likened him to the messiah, they had visions of someone who would bring Israel back to its rightful place of honor in society – a place of status, power and might experienced during the glory days.

But Jesus would have none of that; NONE of it.

The zealous nationalist Jewish leaders had already concluded that Jesus was their enemy. Their plans were to do what any good zealous nationalist must do—destroy their enemy. Thus a plan to kill Jesus is a very logical response against a person whom they consider to be a false messiah and a political liability.

Jesus certainly is the messiah, but he was very different from anything that the leaders of the Jews expected. Jesus primary uniqueness was his likeness to his Father – and he enraged people when he told them how much he was like his Father. Like the clearest mirror you have ever seen, Jesus is the perfect reflection of his Father.

For us, as for the Jews of old, this is so hard to grasp. For thousands of years before Jesus God was that hard to grasp. English Bishop Hugh Montefiore has written, "What we can know about God in the natural world is quite insufficient to enable us to worship him with mind and heart, for it only leads us to believe he exists."<sup>1</sup>

Up until the time of Jesus, God had a name which could not even be stated aloud. Jewish law forbade it. On top of that, no human had ever seen God, so God did not even have a face. How can anyone worship a god without a name and a face?

Faith is about falling in love with God, and we all know that it is nigh unto impossible to fall in love with the abstract. In faith we say to the skeptic and to those of little or no faith, "Come and let me introduce you to God. Jesus is his name. He was a carpenter by trade and lived like all of us."

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<sup>1</sup> Hugh Montefiore, *Credible Christianity* (Mowbray, London: 1993). P. 69.

Jesus came that we might have a living God – a real model who, though like us, is still fully God. As far as the Jewish leaders were concerned, this was Jesus' sin – a sin that was too much for the people to ignore.

Another thing that they could not ignore was that Jesus' presence always demanded a response.

- Some chose to follow Jesus and devote their entire lives to him.
- Others developed such hatred of Jesus that the only thing they could do was to kill him.

As some have accurately said, the first half of each of the four gospels is but a prelude to Jesus' final week upon earth. In this Holy Week we come to a gateway. If the events of Palm Sunday to Easter are going to make any sense at all, it is a gate through we must go. We are told in the scriptures that it is the straight and narrow gate that leads to eternal life. This is the beginning of the final journey leading to the redemption of all men and women. As we approach the gate, God's Son is there asking the question of us; whether or not we believe he and the Father are one. All of the events of Holy Week hinge upon this. If these events are to make any sense at all – have any meaning whatsoever, then first and foremost we must arrive back at Jesus' challenge...

Who do you say that I am?

Galileans, we are about to enter into the holiest week of the Christian year a week that will be marked with the washing of feet, Holy Eucharist, the solemnity of Good Friday services and, will culminate in the Great Vigil of Easter with Holy Baptism. In preparation for those observances you will soon approach the altar of God to be nourished by Christ's body and blood. Jesus' sacrifice calls for a response from you. I pray that you will find new and significant ways to recognize and affirm the personal nature of Christ's sacrifice for you, and that you will be blessed as you continue on your journey toward the resurrection.

AMEN.