

Palm Sunday, March 28, 2010

The Rev. Deacon Peter Cornell

At Palms: Luke 19:28-40, In Procession: Ps 118:1-2, 19-29

Isaiah 50: 4-9a, Psalm 31:9-16

Philippians 2:5-11, Luke 22:14-23:56

LORD, BE IN MY WORDS, IN OUR HEARTS AND IN ALL OUR UNDERSTANDING.

We've just heard the Passion of our Lord, Jesus Christ. The longer version of this proper includes the depiction of the last supper, when Jesus instructed the disciples in the actions which have become our Eucharistic meal. He offers them wine and bread, as his body and blood, blessed by God and taken as a sign of their acceptance into the kingdom. He also gives them the insight that he will no longer be sharing these common foodstuffs with them until he is prepared to share with them in heaven. Also, missing is the identification of the one who will betray him before the day is over. I would like us to reflect on this for a moment. Here are the disciples gathered for what should be the traditional Passover meal. I have been a guest at Seder in years past, and while they are appropriately solemn occasions, they are still a festive meal, reflecting a shared heritage. This night, the small band of the faithful are in hiding from the authorities, and what should be a familiar event takes on this new tone of an impending end. In my mind, I have always associated this night with communion, the celebration of Jesus sharing himself with us as our savior. It is easy to lose sight of the fact that this is also the trigger that results in the events we have just recounted here. The room was filled with suspicion, fear, there were recriminations among the disciples, anger and despair. Jesus chastises Simon, warns Peter he will deny him and releases the betrayer to set the actions in motion. The launch of Christianity is steeped in all of the least desirable human emotions, not the divine gift from God in heaven. We speak of this sequence as the passion of Christ. In researching for this homily, I Googled the origin of the word passion, it comes from the Greek root *PATI*, which means to suffer. This was modified in early English to *pass*, (the same root for the word *passive*) and denotes a state of 'capable of suffering'. The French evolved *pass* to the word *passion*, or strength of feeling. Much earlier in Luke, Jesus had informed his disciples that he would be rejected by the leaders, priests and teachers and for the sake of humankind, would suffer, even to death in order to relieve us from our sins. To achieve this, he must be capable of physical suffering; he must be prepared to experience death as a human. During his time praying in the garden, he is greatly distressed and prays that God his father might spare him this trial, affirming that he is in a state of passion. His anguish is such that his sweat become like tears of blood, spilling out onto the ground. The same blood that will be spilling from his head where the crown of thorns will rest, from the spikes in his hands and feet on the hard wooden cross. But in addition to the physical pain he will endure, he will suffer the emotional trauma of the rejection of the people he has come to save. He has ridden into Jerusalem in triumph, to the adoring shouts of the crowd, covering his path with their garments and palm fronds. He arrives to a welcome fit for a king, a king the people desperately want to elevate who will lead to victory and vindication over their oppressors. He brings unconditional love to a broken world. And now, those same crowds, who shouted hail and welcome to Jesus, demand his crucifixion and reject him over a criminal named Barabbas. The love and trust he has extended to those he has come to save has been used against him, and he is taken prisoner with a sign of affection (the kiss) among the same crowds he sat teaching in the weeks before. For Jesus, who feels the pain and anguish of the weakest among us, this must be like a crushing blow to his mental and emotional state. Jesus is the ultimate empathetic leader, who can relate to the pain that each of us feels. As Jesus is shuttled back and forth between Pilate and Herod, it is clear that neither can find sufficient reason to warrant putting him to death. Pilate comments that Herod

could not sustain a death sentence, and has him flogged, hoping to assuage the anger of the crowd and defuse the pent up emotion of the mob. They both realize that this could become a riot if the crowd's demands are not addressed. Jesus understands how events must unfold, and the part he must play, he continues to remain 'capable of suffering' according to his father's plan. As Jesus is hanging on the cross, between the two criminals, one asks Jesus to remember him in heaven. He is in fact asking Jesus for his com-*passion*, his pity that would incline Jesus to succor or heal him. Compassion shares the same roots as passion, and reveals that while Jesus acted with passion through his crucifixion, he also acted with compassion towards those who now persecute him. He asks god's forgiveness on those who would put him to death, as they clearly do not understand the roles they are playing. And when he hears the cries of the women, he has compassion for them and the generations they have yet to bear, for they will come into a world that he has been unable to save. If the world cannot find its way to follow the commandments to love god and each other with gods own son as a role model in the world (while the wood is green), how will they come to love when he is dead (and the wood is dried up)? We have just acted out the role of an angry crowd, and I hope it has been uncomfortable for all of us. But wasn't it easier to call out 'crucify him' when everyone else was shouting the same? Did you hesitate just a little to make sure you were saying it at the right time, with everyone else? That's the power of a mob; it's just unfortunate that it seems easier to become part of the seething mob bent on harm rather than good. It seems we are wired for cruelty, hatred, and have to learn compassion. This is what Jesus was sent here for, to teach us compassion, and to do that he lived, and died through his passion. Lent is a time of reflection, a time to regain our perspective and recall the compassion we have learned from the passion of the dead and risen Lord. Centurions were the military agents of the empire. And at the end, the centurion, a man hardened and drilled to have no compassion was able to recognize that Jesus was an innocent and compassionate man whose passion finally saved us all from our sins. Amen