

Palm Sunday: 5 April, 2009
Isaiah 50:4-9a; Philippians 2:5-11
Mk 11:1-11; Mk 14:32-15:39

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Even the colt was borrowed, the finery provided by others. Jesus entered the last week of his life with so few possessions: the robe on his back, his sandals, probably a few coins. Within five days, he would have less: the soldiers would dice for the clothing. The friends would leave. His body he would lay down. Even his spirit he would return to its Creator. And yet, he was so greatly loved. And yet, he was envied.

This is a hard week to wrap your mind around. Bishop Councill, quoting Ida Gorres, compared it to trying to drink from Niagara Falls with a thimble. "But if you hold a cup under a waterfall, it's not only knocked right out of your hand, but empty to boot, the rushing, tumbling water simply rebounds."¹ I like this image, because it points me to one of the essential truths about this week: Jesus didn't control it either. Before the Incarnation, the Son formed the world and held it in his hands. Even after he took flesh, he was a prophet, a healer, a miracle-worker, the Lord of nature and an inspiration to women and men. But with Palm Sunday, he becomes suddenly passive, allows people to do with him whatever they are going to do, submitting to parade and scorn alike. He placed himself, in Henry Roth's phrase, at "the mercy of a rude stream," and it led him to the cross.²

This is, perhaps, the time when Christ most fully embraced his humanity, for to be human is essentially to lack control over ourselves and what is around us. We yearn to shape our world, and yet weeds grow in our gardens (they certainly grow in mine!). We strive to control at least our selves, to achieve the stoic's self-mastery or the saint's perfection, and yet, like St. Paul, we find ourselves doing, not the things we want, but the very things we hate. (Rom 7:15) If nothing else, the years since September of 2001 have revealed our sense of mastery to be an illusion. The safety we enjoy is the gift of others' restraint. The peace in which we live our daily lives belies the wars that are fought on our behalf, and which we do not seem able to bring to an end. The prosperity we treasure is at the mercy of forces we do not fully understand. Perhaps it is time to walk this road with Jesus, and see how he endured such uncertainty.

Pilate believed that "it was out of jealousy that the chief priests had handed [Christ] over," (Mark 15:10) and this rings true to me. From the very beginning, humankind has been jealous of God.³ When the serpent tempted Eve, it was this he played on, whispering in sibilant syllables, "God knows that when you eat of it...you will be like God." (3:5) *You will be like God, knowing good and evil.* The problem is, God knows only good. To know evil is to know yourself to be at the mercy of forces you cannot control, destructive forces you cannot control. In the moment Eve and Adam tasted the fruit, we moved from shaping our world to being shaped by it, the good often hovering just beyond our grasp, the evil too often holding us in its own. Unable to emulate God, we lower our sights and seek to emulate one another, keeping up with the Joneses, not Jesus. Even at our best, we are essentially passive in the face of the great mysteries: birth and dying, hatred and love, even though we do bustle about like toddlers, trying to order our surroundings and knocking over a few cups in the process. If you've ever sat in a hospital waiting room, you know the sensation all too

¹ From the journals of Ida Gorres, as quoted by Martin L. Smith, in his *A Season for the Spirit*. A longer version is cited on Bishop Councill's Lenten blog, at www.newjersey.anglican.org/Diocese/bishop/blog/index.html.

² "Rood", pronounced "rude", is the ancient name for the Cross.

³ Even our language betrays this shift: "jealous" and "zealous" spring from the same root, and we, who are to be zealous for God, settle for jealousy instead. (Scriptural heroes such as Elijah, Phinehas, Jesus, the Maccabees, and Paul are all described as being "zealous for God.")

clearly: what is essential to your very life is taking place beyond closed doors, and all you can do is hope and trust.

That is the space Jesus entered his week. Since we were unable to attain God's perfection, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, and shared our smallness, even our death. He countered our envy with empathy, a perfect sharing in our limitations, so that there would be no distance between ourselves and him, was lifted high upon the Cross so that, looking at his tattered flesh, we would know again the difference between the twisted love that is jealousy, and the pure love that is given us by God.

As little as Christ had, he brought with him perfect trust in God. Trust that God would provide an ass for him ride. Trust that there would be an upper room prepared for the Passover feast. Trust that he would have time to say what he needed to say to his friends, before his time ran out. Trust that they would meet him in Galilee, even after the shame of their betrayal. Trust enough to pray in the bitterness of Gethsemane, with the sweat of fear running down like blood, "not what I want, but what you want." (Mark 14:36) Trust, finally, in his hour of abandonment, to cry out even to the heavens which seemed empty of the Father's love, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." (Luke 23:46) Somehow, Christ knew that what was essential could not be taken away, for what is essential to true life is God, and God is at the mercy of no other force in heaven or in earth.

The Passion of Christ is unnerving to me, because it does not look like the work of a trustworthy God. To see Christ lose so much, to see him suffer, to see him die, does not immediately renew my joy in God. And yet, there is not one of us who will fail to walk that road. Our day will come in which we leave our homes, our friends, our treasured things, our body. And so let us walk with Jesus, practicing the hardest dance of all, in which lay all that we have and all that we are into the hands of God, the only one who can raise us up.

Let us pray:

I give myself completely to you, God.

Assign me to my place in your creation.

Let me suffer for you.

Give me the work you would have me do.

Give me many tasks,

or have me step aside while you call others.

Put me forward or humble me.

Give me riches or let me live in poverty.

I freely give all that I am and all that I have to you.

And now, holy God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit –

You are mine and I am yours. So be it.⁴

⁴ "The Covenant Service," *From Hope to Joy*, by Don Saliers. Edited from early Puritan texts.