

God Found the Way: Palm Sunday '06

Palm Sunday is one of the most important days in the Christian year. Palm Sunday is also in some ways an extremely confusing day. I always wonder if people arrive thinking today is going to be a glorious festival, only to find out what happens is a somber entry point to a lynching. This is the most real story ever told - it's the story against which all others are judged; bar none. It is the story of how God found a way to us, even while we were not yet looking; and even, when we don't look, now.

All four Gospels tell the story. The Apostle Paul then comments on the story and explains it to us. One of the most important explanations comes in his letter to the church in Corinth. The Corinthian Christians had a serious problem. They may be a lot like us. They didn't like to hear about the Crucifixion of Christ. They liked preaching with spiritual decorum. That's why Paul writes to them, "*When I came to you, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty words of wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*"

Christianity stands or falls on Holy Week: *Jesus Christ and him crucified*. There is a solemn rhythm to Holy Week that's been worked out over two millennia, which triumphs over every folly and aberration, because the basic storyline remains intact no matter how much we mess around with it. From Palm Sunday to Maundy Thursday to Good Friday to the Day of Resurrection, the essential story of our Lord's betrayal, suffering, Cross and victory is all here. If you miss these services, you miss your major opportunity to worship at the very center of our faith.

This story of *Jesus Christ and him crucified* is not the same thing as "religion" or "spirituality." No religion ever dreamed of has had at its center a judicial execution by public torture.

The Gnostic Gospels, of Thomas and lately, of DaVinci Code fame, which sometimes get so much public attention, are different from the Biblical Gospels in many ways, but the biggest difference of all is that they omit the crucifixion. They skip over it as though it had never happened.

The opposite is true of the four Biblical Gospels. When the four Evangelists tell the story of our Lord, instead of suppressing the fact of the Crucifixion, focus on it. They emphasize it; they put in the central position. The story of Jesus' Passion takes up far more space than any other New Testament story. We read portions of it every year on Palm Sunday, and then again through this Holy Week to come. The accounts vary quite a bit, but there can be no question

about their fundamental place in the Christian story, including all the ghastly details of what happens at weeks' end.

Mel Gibson's movie about the Passion of Christ, whether you've seen it or not, has taught the undeniable message that a Roman scourging and crucifixion was unimaginably terrible. We didn't always know this. Now we do, or we ought to if we're paying attention. The question that follows is, why? Why such a brutal, ugly, public and shameful death? Why does this week, beginning so gloriously, have to end with such horror, shame and pain? Why not just a clean stroke with a sharp sword - and then an immediate and triumphant miraculous recovery?

I've been thinking about words the Apostle Paul wrote to Christians in Corinth. It's a congregation that gave him a lot of heartache. They'd become very "spiritual." They'd forgotten the impact of the Cross and were enamored with their own religious accomplishments, their insider mentality- with all others on the outside. Paul wrote to call them back to the central message. *Christ died for all*; he died not only for the spiritual and the religious, but also and especially *for the ungodly*, the unspiritual. The message of Christ's **redeeming** death for those **unredeemable** is the very core of the gospel.

And Paul continues, '*All this is from God*'. Why does he say that? He says it because it was so hard for the Corinthians and it is so hard for us to recognize that this isn't a story about how we should be religious or spiritual, but a story about how **God found the way** to break through our spiritual resistance, our determination to have religion on our own terms, our persistent pursuit of "the devices and desires of our own hearts." Our salvation is *from God*. It is not from our selves. All the religious striving and spiritual techniques in the world will not make it happen for us. We do not earn our way into heaven. Our salvation is a matter of grace through faith in our Risen Lord. Salvation is from first to last the act of God '*who through Christ reconciled ... the world to himself*'.

This isn't easy to recognize. It doesn't make sense to us. There's too much of our lives, our hopes; our dreams to get in the way of fully understanding this. There has got to be something we need to do to help accomplish this salvation thing, to have it fully take hold in our lives. We think that we have to keep seeking & discovering the right way to find God in our lives, when God, in fact, has long ago found us. In more than one way this morning, we resemble the crowds who cheered Jesus on in his entry to the Holy City, supporting him in his triumphant arrival ready to join his new campaign. The irony of that first rag-tag procession is that it's enthusiastic participants were wrong in their expectation that Jesus would immediately restore the fortune of Jerusalem, but they were right in their hope that he is the Messiah, the

Lord and Savior.

Today we share in that same spirit as spectators; we want to somehow believe that Jesus rode into the city triumphant, that his journey proceeded without hindrance to a victorious celebration on Sunday. Even after 2,000 years, we're still not ready to hear this story- told as it should be.

By our Lord Jesus giving himself up to his followers, those who first cheered him with Hosannas', then who reacted much more casually when problems emerged, and finally, those same crowds who called for his death, Christ places himself in the path of the very worst that Sin and Death can do. Christ has done this not only for the *victims* of evil, but also for the *perpetrators* of evil. Which means that we can't shake off God's love for us regardless of what we do, what role we might play in this week's procession of events; for God has found the way to love us all.

It's not likely that we could have ever imagined such a way to find the way to save humanity from itself. It's not something we normally consider - but it is the first of the essential questions to be asked this week. To cut to the chase- why does God choose this way? How are we to understand this eternal message of God for us now - at this time and in this place ... The answer to that question is a mystery – perhaps the greatest of all mysteries.

One who has attempted an answer is the novelist, Wendell Berry. In his novel, *Jayber Crow*, there's a remarkable passage I'd like to share with you.

Jayber Crow is the village barber in a sad little Kentucky riverfront town called Port William. Once upon a time Jayber went to Bible college, thinking to become a preacher, but the fire in his bones cooled. He settles into a comfortable role as Port William's bachelor barber, gravedigger and all-around philosopher. In this passage, Jayber reflects on the meaning – or lack of meaning – of the death of a local boy, Jimmy Chatham, in the Vietnam War:

"For a while again I couldn't pray. I didn't dare to. In the most secret place of my soul I wanted to beg the Lord to reveal Himself in power. I wanted to tell Him that it was time for His coming. If there was anything at all to what the Lord had promised, why didn't He come in glory with angels and lay His hands on the hurt children and awaken the dead soldiers and restore the burned villages and the blasted and poisoned land? Why didn't He cow our arrogance? -- Lying awake in the night (for again sleep was coming hard) I could imagine the almighty finger writing in stars for all the world to see: GO HOME.

But thinking such things was as dangerous as praying them. I knew who had thought such thoughts before: "Let Christ the King of Israel descend now from the cross, that we may see and

believe." Where in my own arrogance was I going to hide?

Where did I get my knack for being a fool? If I could advise God, why didn't I just advise Him (like our great preachers and politicians) to be on our side and give us victory and make sure that Jimmy Chatham had not died in vain? I had to turn around and wade out of the mire myself.

Christ did not descend from the cross except into the grave. And why not otherwise? Wouldn't it have put fine comical expressions on the faces of the scribes and the chief priests and the soldiers if at that moment He had come down in power and glory? Why didn't He do it? Why hasn't He done it at any one of a thousand good times between then and now?

I knew the answer. I knew it a long time before I could admit it, for all suffering of the world is in it. He didn't, He hasn't, because from the moment He did, He would be the absolute tyrant of the world and we would be His slaves.

Even those who hated Him and hated one another and hated their own souls would have to believe in Him then. From that moment the possibility that we might be bound to Him and He to us and us to one another by love forever would be ended.

And so, I thought, He must forebear to reveal His power and glory by presenting Himself as Himself, and must be present only in the ordinary miracle of the existence of His creatures. Those who wish to see Him must see Him in the poor, the hungry, the hurt, the wordless creatures, the groaning and travailing beautiful world." [Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (New York: Counterpoint, 2000), pp. 294-295.]

So what was Jesus then doing with his triumphal entry into Jerusalem at the beginning of this week, if he wasn't opening the eyes of those who were to see that God's love couldn't be shaken off, could not be killed off, could endure any suffering disgrace, shame and torture.

What then, are **we** doing here - if not to be witnesses to this story meant for all of us, that God has found the way to share eternal love and compassion that will lead us, this week, into this most sacred journey. Amen.