

Palm Sunday Message

John 12:12-19

April 5, 2020

The story of Jesus “triumphal entry” into Jerusalem – depicted as a joyous parade, is more a prelude to battle. The combatants, if we may use that term, seem obvious – Jesus and the Pharisees. Yet according to John there are others of critical importance – and their allegiance from “one camp to the other” will ultimately tip the scales of the battle.

John tells us that Jesus entered Jerusalem from Bethany, the city of Mary and Martha and most crucially, Lazarus. Days earlier Lazarus was dead – until Jesus called him out of his tomb. Now Lazarus was a celebrity – folks galore wanted to see him and his home in Bethany had become somewhat of a tourist attraction. These same crowds now provided Jesus an entourage into Jerusalem for the start of the Passover, and the Pharisees were livid about it. Something had to be done to swing momentum – read popular opinion – read “the crowds” back in their favor – or (as in so many words they say in verse 19) *‘this war is over.’*

Mind you Jesus never wanted a fight - hence he mounts a donkey, a symbol of a monarch seeking terms of peace. The Pharisees see invasion in this parade – and understandably. In surrounding villages and by lakeshores Jesus preached salvation through the gracious forgiveness of sins and like a virus the message spread until many understood that God’s altar and abode was a human heart. And when someone who preaches that sort of message can also raise the dead - well... To the Pharisees you see the altar and abode of God was and must remain the temple whose courts and gates they controlled. And here came Jesus. The only thing that could stop him from spreading his message through the holy city was containment, and as we’ve all discovered the best containment is separation...by whatever means.

A popular conception among many people is that Jesus Christ wants to change how people live – then muster them into an army of trained, regimented and disciplined followers. But that’s what Pharisees did, or tried to do, and they were pretty good at it. But God in Jesus Christ didn’t come into the world to be a better version of a Pharisee – he came, John said in chapter 10, that people may have life in abundance. He came not to show a person how to live but reveal what life is for. That doesn’t mean improvement- it means transformation. Such a message challenges all the forms by which we know ourselves and order ourselves. And human hearts...as Jesus and the Pharisees both knew...are fickle.

Thus, his entry into Jerusalem triggers a counter offensive. Jesus entry into our lives always does that though – our old sinful selves are no pushover. Triumphal Entry of Jesus? Not yet. This donkey riding Savior triumphs another way. As you listen to the story of the Passion of Jesus – please know that what Jesus is truly passionate about is you. That’s another way in which this story suggests a battle. Triumphant Jesus would soon see human devotion evaporate like a morning mist. The Pharisee’s message of safety in old ways would win the day.

It’s a time-honored tradition to appeal to safety in things we’re used to and comfortable with. By Friday morning of the week we now call holy, that message would win the day. It is our salvation that Jesus would not retreat to what he was used to – being the second person of the Trinity – God incarnate – eternally gloried in heaven. Imagine the emotions that waged in our Lord as you listen to this story – he came to bring peace on earth – he could have settled for *détente*, an uneasy cessation of hostilities between God and humanity, but no lasting truce, no resolution, and for us, and this is always about us with Jesus - no peace.

Jesus was tempted by many things in this story we’re about to hear – countless emotions must have contended within him – anger and sadness to name a few. As you listen remember his greatest temptation was to return to heaven without visiting a cross. But he wouldn’t do that – he couldn’t do that, and the reason is...you. In these dark, difficult days our world is in – it provides some measure of hope that for a time, we all want the same thing – to be safe and well and to combat a terrible pandemic. As one Facebook post I read earlier this week said; *“Isn’t nice that at least in this world war, everyone is on the same side?”*

Human hearts are fickle though. And once this pandemic is past the tide of goodwill to all is going to face some serious competition. Humans tend to return to our old ways. But right now, we’ve an opportunity to choose life, by thinking more highly of others than we do ourselves and so, as our lesson from Philippians says; *“have the mind of Christ.”* Selflessness and charity and patience and kindness are a good way to live. If we stick with it, we’ll show that Jesus entry into Jerusalem was a triumph after all.

So now, the story of the passion of Jesus of Nazareth – your forgiver and your friend...