

Palm Sunday Homily: "Hailing Jesus as King Who Reigned from a Cross"
The Rev. Gary Coffey Grace Episcopal Asheville 4/13/2014

Today is Palm Sunday. It supposed to be a day of celebration and praise. We have our palms in our hands as the people did along the road leading into Jerusalem. We echo them in their shouts of praise. Like them, we begin to realize that Jesus is presenting Himself as Messiah, not on a warhorse as a conquering hero, but as God's humble servant, riding on a donkey.

The people along the road with us are hailing Jesus as their King, and rightly so, for He was and is the King of the Jews and of all humanity, truth be told. As was the custom for honoring their king, they spread their garments upon the road as a sign of honor. They shouted, 'Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the Name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!' Calling Jesus the Son of David was a reference to Jesus as the Messiah. Shouting Hosanna to Jesus meant, "Help us, Lord!" So, clearly, those standing on the side of the road that day were looking to Jesus as their King and Messiah, to deliver them from the Roman oppression. Therefore, all of these accolades made both the Jewish religious leaders and the Roman occupation uneasy as they both feared that the people might just follow this Jesus into a revolt. In fact, the people seemed poised and ready to do so.

We know that the Palm Sunday service moves from joy to sorrow as we read the Passion Gospel. I used to think that the fact that the crowd at the first of the week was crying out Hossana to the Son of David as Jesus rode into Jerusalem and later on in the week the crowd was crying, "Let him be crucified" was a demonstration of the fickle nature

of human beings. However, scholars tell us that these were very likely two different crowds. The one was made up of followers of Jesus who recognized Him as the Messiah. The other was a paid off crowd of street hooligans crying for Jesus' death.

As we hear the Passion Narrative, especially read in such a dramatic way, it touches us. It moves us deeply. Something within us cries out at this grand miscarriage of justice. Something else within us understands that for some reason things were meant to play out in this way.

We think of Jesus' cross and resurrection as uniting us with God. The theological term is called atonement. We can remember what atonement means by breaking the word into three words, at-one-ment. What did the death of Jesus mean? What was it that it accomplished?

Historically, there have been three main theories of the atonement. I thought it might be helpful for us to touch on each of them briefly this morning.

Perhaps the most familiar of the three was championed by St. Anselm and is called the substitutionary theory. The idea is that Christ died in our place, mine and yours. Since the wages of sin is death and since all of us, the Scripture says, have fallen short of the glory of God and have sinned, then the "wages" we deserved for our sin was spiritual death or separation from God. The Scripture says that "Jesus, who knew no sin, became sin, that in Him, we might become the righteousness of God." Jesus paid the penalty of death that He didn't owe, for us, who owed a penalty of death that we couldn't pay without losing our lives spiritually.

This is what we mean when we say that Christ died for our sins. A question we might think about this morning is, “How does that make us feel, the fact that Christ died for us?” It seems to me that there are two basic ways we can feel about this. We can feel sad and guilty about this or we can feel joyful and grateful. Remember that the Gospel is Good News and remember that a very central part of this Gospel is that Christ died for our sins. Since the Gospel is good news, wouldn't it make sense for us to feel joyful and grateful that Christ did this for us? And don't you think that when you are trying to explain how the good news is good news to someone else, that they will never understand it if we describe the good news as making us feel sad and guilty? The good news might make a lot more sense if we said, “Jesus loved us so much that He laid down his very life for us, that we might be forgiven for all of our sins, and no longer feel sad and guilty, but joyful and thankful. We are therefore free, free to live in that joy and thankfulness that Jesus provided for us through the Cross.

The second way of thinking about the Cross and the Atonement is called the Christus Victor Theory. This theory emphasizes Jesus' victory over evil and sin and hell and death through the Cross. By hanging Jesus on a tree, the forces of evil thought that they had defeated this Christ, but the plan backfired on them and God raised Him from death robbing them of their power forever. Christ the Victorious forevermore!

The third theory is called the Abelardian theory after its proponent Peter Abelard. Abelard maintained that the Cross was a sort of object lesson which demonstrated the height and depth of the love of God. He said that when humanity sees the love of this God who sacrificed Himself for the world, that the people will be moved to love and follow God in return.

I wonder, as you heard these three theories described this morning, which of the three resonates most with you? The good news is that the three of these theories are not mutually exclusive. One could easily embrace all three and like examining a multi-faceted gem, these can serve as three vantage points from which to view the significance of the Cross of Christ.

In closing, I would like to suggest that we remain seated this morning and sing hymn 474, When I Survey the Wondrous Cross quietly and meditatively, thinking about the words as an offering to the One Who loved us and who gave Himself for us.

Hymn 474