

Palm Sunday 2008

We have entered into Jerusalem this day with Jesus and his disciples and the crowd. We can think of this as a parade to celebrate a hero. A parade is the way we honor heroes whose sacrifice was great. Why do some call the parade of Jesus a triumph when he will be arrested for sedition four days from now? Why is this week called Holy?

After the Passover is celebrated Jesus will call for the donkey colt to fulfill all scripture. Jesus was careful to show that his life and ministry would follow scripture. The Messianic prophecies regarding Jesus' life are remarkably matched with his birth in Bethlehem, his zeal for his Father's house when he teaches the elders in the Temple, his baptism, his Temptation, his address to his home synagogue, his miracles, the Triumphal Entry on Palm Sunday, the remembering of the Passover with his disciples to his death and resurrection in Jerusalem. Everything Jesus said and would point to this week and find fulfillment in this holiest of weeks.

No other life was as purpose driven. He gave up all so we might gain everything. He would bring together two great religions in one when we celebrate the Passover with Jesus on Holy Thursday. He will call on his followers to remember the great commandments of loving God and neighbor by demonstration and not just in word. He would pay the ultimate sacrifice not just for one nation but for the world. His violent death would be a witness for non-violence against those enemies and opposing forces brought together for death and destruction ever since his cross. Need I say more as to why we say his entry into the Holy City was triumphant?

Then we can go on to say a few things about the last week of Jesus life being "Holy." Holy is a word we hear in everyday life to express surprise used with other words like "cow," "Moses," or just plain swearing. It also means that someone or something is awe-inspiring, sacred and clearly out of the ordinary. In a religious sense it is "to be set apart" for or "dedicated" to God. When a person lives a "holy" life it means that he or she is making an effort to be exemplary in word and deed. The word "saintly" or "consecrated" could also be applied. In paintings the artistic Masters show holiness with a "halo" above a figure's head. Halos designate a godly and virtuous person.

For Christians "Holy Week" is a time set apart for prayer and reflection on the righteous suffering, crucifixion and resurrection of

Jesus Christ. For his work this week, he alone may claim the title of “Redeemer of Souls,” “Great Physician,” and “Savior.” Pilgrims from all over the globe will gather in Jerusalem to remember and repent of their sins this week. We too gather to meditate upon and attempt to fathom the love of which no greater has been shown.

Palm Sunday calls upon us to respond to a holy life lived by Jesus whose name means “the Lord saves.” Of that name our second reading tells us, “Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:9-11). Say the name Jesus, and there are a lot of people who will respond that Jesus is a great moral teacher. He’s a great spiritual guru, just like Buddha, Mohammed, Vishnu or Mother Earth. He’s an ethical character of a story, as in Aesop’s fables. Or Jesus is not much more than a swear word.

None of these understandings of “Jesus” are going to bow a knee or loosen a tongue.

The problem is that Christianity isn’t offering compelling counter pictures of Jesus to a confused culture. Ghandi spoke indicting words to this end: “I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.”

When governors and other leaders are being indicted for their behavior today I can not help but double my efforts to live a righteous and virtuous life. Christians should expect that of their clergy.

The expectations work both ways. And all Christians could stand to reckon with what they call Lord beside the name of Jesus Christ:

- We’ll call money, wealth and ambition Lord, but not Jesus Lord.
- We’ll call sports, recreation and leisure time Lord, but not Jesus Lord.
- We’ll call children, family and relationships Lord, but not Jesus Lord.
- We’ll call drugs, alcohol and sex Lord, but not Jesus Lord.
- We’ll call happiness, self-realization and self-improvement Lord, but not Jesus Lord.

- We'll call graduate degrees, fellowships and tenure Lord, but not Jesus Lord.
- We'll call careers, promotions and 401(k)s Lord, but not Jesus Lord.

Our scriptures level the playing field. Jesus did not die for our 401(k)s. Confessing Jesus as Lord is to acknowledge that the Jesus on the donkey is the person who embodies all that I am and should be.

What if we are one of those who *have bent the knee, as it were*? We love the name Jesus. Where do we go from here? The path is laid for us. It begins this Sunday. We must go with Jesus to the cross. We must give to him ourselves. "Just as I am with out one plea. But that Thy blood was shed for me, And that Thou bidst me come to Thee, O Lamb of God, I come, I come" (Charlotte Elliot – 1835). Amen.