



The Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday
Year C, April 14th 2019
Whiplash Sunday
Rev. Ed Steever
Gospel Lesson Luke 22:14 — 23:56

Whew! What on earth can I say after that Gospel lesson? After the entry to Jerusalem and then the story of the Passion, we are pulled from the highest of highs, where our Messiah is entering Jerusalem to the cheers and exultations of a huge crowd of followers, ready to take on the Romans and send them packing, all the way down to trial, conviction and a death sentence: what was once the hope of the nation is now dead and buried. That's why I sometimes refer to this Sunday as Whiplash Sunday: since we can get emotional whiplash from the extreme changes during the service.

One piece of this passage that I want to mention is the first thing that Jesus says when he is on the cross. It is a prayer: "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." Notice, not a prayer for himself or his friends but for the people who are putting him to death. Not a prayer asking for vengeance, but a prayer asking for God to forgive them. The first words that Jesus utters are a prayer for the forgiveness of the soldiers who paraded him through the city streets and who nailed him to the cross. With his arms stretched out upon the hard wood of the cross, high above the murderous hands of those who had crucified him Jesus prays "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."

And with those words and with that prayer, everything changes. These are among the most revolutionary and transformative words ever spoken in human history. "Forgive my enemies, because they do not know what they are doing." With this prayer Jesus takes all of the hatred and all of the violence and all of the vengeance of the world and says. "Enough."

Enough, We've had enough of the spiral of silence and counter-violence that just leads to more of the same. It has to end somewhere. Enough.

"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."

With these words, with this prayer, Christ shatters the glamour of violence that blinds us in this world, and sets in its place a vision of reconciliation and peace. Please remember that in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says to his disciples, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

What Jesus preached in the Sermon on the Mount, he practiced on the Mount of Calvary. On the cross, Jesus prays for his enemies, "Father forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing," and everything changes.

Jesus of Nazareth lived and died in the real world, and it was a world saturated and captivated by violence and hatred, not much different than our current situation. In these first words from the cross, in this prayer Jesus reveals God's own costly love for the world, mediating God's forgiveness and friendship even in the midst of our violent world. In this prayer from the cross, Christ takes all of it upon himself, all of the hatred and all of the violence of the world and he says, "no more." Christ opens up for us, even in the midst of our broken and violent world, a new future of reconciliation and peace. How long will it take until this weary world wakes up and realises it?

On this Palm Sunday, I want to take a point of personal preference. We see in the earthly ministry of Jesus that all things come to an end. According to the Gospels he taught and ministered for about three years. It only took him that long to antagonise the church authorities to the point that they wanted to kill him. I have been with you here at St. Paul's for about 15 years, but I would like to paraphrase the words of a favourite character of mine, Bilbo Baggins: First of all, I need to tell you that I am immensely fond of you all, and that fifteen years is too short a time to be amongst such excellent and admirable people. I don't know half of you half as well as I should like; and I like less than half of you half as well as you deserve.

But even though 15 years is too short a time to spend among you, Katherine and I are moving to Washington State to be with children, grand-children and great-grand-children. We have purchased a new house and are putting our home here up for sale. We shall be here for a while longer, but I have told the bishop that I will officially retire effective the first day of June.

It has been my privilege and my honour to be your deacon and your companion in the way. I pray that your growth in the faith will continue and surpass your wildest dreams.