

A TRUE CHANCE

Palm Sunday is a pivotal event in the life and ministry of Jesus. Yet in many places, it is relegated to an incidental story - merely the introduction to Holy Week. It was a charming moment but it failed, so let's move on to the important events: Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter.

The problem is, if we drop Palm Sunday out of the story, we cannot fully understand the Cross. Without Palm Sunday, we get theologies that no longer remember the human drama - theologies based on the precept that God killed Jesus, a sacrifice of the perfect man standing in for the punishment we deserve. Some of those theologies even go on to claim that without any response or repentance or devotion on our part, we are suddenly and magically "saved by His blood." To be sure, blood is a symbol of life to the ancient world, and Jesus' blood is incredibly precious if we love Him. But that does not turn it into a magic potion.

What is the meaning of the Cross and the Resurrection? The truth never fits very neatly into mere words, but the truth is: we either kill our selves - or we kill Jesus. That is: we kill our self-will, our old way of life, and claim Jesus' WAY - or we keep our old self, and destroy any influence or authority Jesus might have over our lives. In the mystery of faith, if we kill the old self in order to let Jesus rule in our lives, then He introduces us to our true selves. The reality is that our self-will is not our true self, and it never brings us what we truly seek. Self-will is not our soul - our inner being - but is only a composite of the survival techniques we learned in the environment in which we grew up. Jesus knows us far better and deeper than that. But He does not show us our true selves until we grant Him permission to do so. And from our side, that means giving Him authority over our lives.

That is the meaning of the Cross and the Resurrection. And that is the meaning of baptism: we die to self, in order that He might come to life within us. No matter where we turn in Christendom, it is always about death and resurrection. And no matter where we turn in Christendom, it is also about how we duck and dodge and try to deny that it should have to come to this - that our self-will is this far separated from God; that we, or our world, are in this much trouble. Always we claim we can get better if we try: our self-will can make it just fine if we concentrate a little harder; let's try some more controlled sinning before giving it over;

conversion is such a radical solution, what if we don't like it - will we ever be able to get back to our self-will? Nevertheless, the truth is: we either kill our selves, or we kill Jesus.

But we wouldn't know any of this if it hadn't been brought to light for us on Palm Sunday. We are saved by the blood of Jesus not because it's a magic potion, but because it breaks our hearts in a way that finally brings us to understanding ... to awakening ... to conversion. Christianity is full of mystery and spiritual presence and power we never fully understand, but that's no reason to cloud what we really can understand. If we do that, we simply miss the point of His coming and never come to the change: the awakening, the repentance, the New LIFE that is offered. This world is at enmity with God, and the Cross proves it beyond contradiction. If we do not see and understand this, even with our limited and earth-based minds, then we never come to repentance - we never come to the clear choice: Our world and its ways, or God's Kingdom and his ways. We kill our self-will, or we kill the will and WAY of Jesus (at least in our own time on this earth).

Many threads and themes come together on Palm Sunday. Jesus is declaring His true identity for the first time in public. Prior to this, He has hinted, implied, demonstrated, teased, told stories, and done deeds that can only point to this conclusion. But none of it was clear or bold enough to get Him officially arrested and killed - until Palm Sunday. It had been enough to get Him killed *unofficially* before Palm Sunday, if He hadn't been too cagey for His enemies. But now the die is cast: Jesus has declared Himself the Rightful King, the long-expected Messiah. He drops His disguise and rides into Jerusalem in a manner nobody alive at the time could miss or mistake. He rides through the Golden Gate, straight to the temple mount - the religious and political center of Judaism and all Israel - and He claims the authority to purify and rededicate the temple, as the True and Rightful Priest and King of Israel - the Messiah, the Son of David - and more. Don't stop at the details and miss the message. The colt ... the waving palm branches ... the garments being thrown down in front of Him ... the shouts of *Hosanna!* ("*Save us now! Save, I pray!*") - the details are only significant in the light of the incredible declaration of His true identity. It all points to one conclusion: Jesus is the long-awaited, long-expected Messiah. Jesus is the Rightful King of Israel. Jesus is God's "Chosen One" - the focal point and fulfillment of Israel's destiny and purpose.

The evidence was overwhelming for anybody who was not determined to ignore it. There should have been little doubt left in anyone's mind. Only the Messiah could have the power that Jesus was displaying. Only the Messiah could have the wisdom and understanding that Jesus was revealing. But people also assumed that the Messiah would use military might. They assumed the Messiah would smash anybody who got in the way or disagreed. Jesus' failure to do this smashing and destroying is why Jews do not believe in Him to this day. It is why many "Christians" do not fully believe in Him either. At least half of Christendom is still waiting for Jesus to "come again," to "return" and do this smashing and destroying because He didn't do it right the first time. We are waiting for kingdom come ... waiting to give our full allegiance and support ... waiting - when the Kingdom has already come and Jesus is already in our midst, *waiting for us!*

Sorry, I digress. Back to the story. Jesus is not living a one-dimensional life, though lots of people try to picture it that way. He is in deep conflict and contention with many of the most powerful leaders of His nation: King Herod wants to kill Him, and so does the High Priest; most of the Sanhedrin is willing to condemn Him; it's no surprise that the Sadducees are angry enough to commit murder. The surprise is that so many of the Pharisees - the most respected and sincerely religious reformers of their time - are also ready to do away with Him.

The point is, if Jesus had just been only praying up north in Galilee, none of this unpleasantness would have developed. If Jesus had been merely teaching and healing, none of this anger and opposition would have built up. It makes no sense, on the one hand, to keep insisting that Jesus is sweet and nice and asks us only to be pleasant to one another, when, on the other hand, we finally realize that incredibly sincere and religious people are so angered and threatened by Him that they turn Him over to Roman authorities and insist that He be executed. It makes no sense to pretend that Jesus is *only* a healer and a teacher. It makes no sense to see *only* the spiritual part of His teachings. Jesus is killed because He is trying to take over the nation - because He is claiming to be the Rightful King. And He is doing it so successfully that those who are in positions of power know that if they don't stop Him, He will in fact succeed - He will in fact supersede them. He will in fact *become the King*. The part of the story many people refuse to notice is the part that makes it very clear that it is Jesus who is pushing it - it is Jesus who will not let it alone. It is Jesus who is the aggressor. Palm Sunday

is what makes this all too uncomfortably clear. And I suspect that's why we don't want to be very clear about Palm Sunday.

Oh, do not miss it! Jesus rides into Jerusalem and He takes over the temple. He teaches there and proclaims His Kingship each day - to the rising enthusiasm of growing crowds - from Palm Sunday to Thursday night. And every attempt to discredit Him only increases His reputation, highlights His wisdom, and increases His popularity. The authorities are beside themselves. Something must be done to stop Him. And Jesus just keeps pushing it: "I am the Messiah. These leaders you have at present are frauds. They do not live or speak for God. They cannot lead you to salvation or peace. Choose me. Follow me."

Of course we have our reasons for not wanting to see this very clearly. We have strong and important motives, however conscious or semiconscious, for *wanting* to keep the story from making very much sense. I want Jesus to seem sweet and loving so I never have to give Him any other right or authority to challenge me or my life. I want the crucifixion to come out of nowhere, be somebody else's fault, and have nothing to do with Jesus' challenge or claim to be *my* Rightful King. But the truth is, Palm Sunday is a pivotal event in my personal life also - and in your lives, as well - and not just on that long-ago day in Jerusalem. And I don't blame you for not wanting to notice it, because I know how much I try to avoid noticing it. Only, then we don't get in on the story. We don't get to be part of His Kingdom. We don't get to have Him for our King.

Jesus rides into our lives just exactly the way He rode into Jerusalem those many years ago. And He asks us to depose the powers and authorities that rule over us, and to claim Him and coronate Him instead - just exactly as He did in Jerusalem. And we get exactly the same choice that Israel got. We know deep within that He is who He says He is, but we don't want to give up control of our lives any more than the folks in Jerusalem did so many years ago. We want to stay in control of how we live, what we do, how we do it, what we live for. And our whole culture and education and training urge and confirm that we should stay in control and run our own lives. But Jesus keeps pushing it. Yet even as He pushes, He leaves it up to us. It is our choice. We cannot have Him as our King unless we claim Him so. But the claim itself is so annoying and disturbing and compelling that we cannot just let it be. We must choose Him ... or find some way to kill Him - some way to silence the claim; to mute it, gag it,

or shut it away somewhere so we can go on doing things our own way without hearing His call.

Oh yes, Palm Sunday is pivotal! Jesus claims His true authority, and sets the choice before us. Rejecting the choice *always* leads to crucifixion. He never leaves it alone. He always pushes it until we choose, one way or another: “coronate me, or kill me.” Therefore, if we choose not to have Him as our King, we spend enormous energy trying not to notice that we made this choice, and even more energy trying not to notice what results from it. We don’t recall making any choice; it didn’t really happen; it wasn’t real; it was somebody else’s fault; there’s no such King, or Kingdom; maybe the translation is wrong; maybe it’s all just myth or legend ... and on and on. But the trouble is, when we run our own lives, they get smaller and more meaningless as we go. And sometimes more bitter and painful and cruel, too. And what if we choose the other way? It’s called “conversion” - a New King to rule our lives, and a New Kingdom to live in and to serve.

Here is my point, and for me the core and essence of Palm Sunday: Jesus made a clear bid for Kingship, and set the authentic choice before His followers and all Israel. If He had not done this, the Cross would have lost much of its personal power and meaning. To put it another way: If the nation *had* chosen Jesus, with conviction and allegiance, *Good Friday would never have happened*. His death was the direct result of their refusal to acknowledge His Kingship. And it wasn’t just that some opposed Him and some loved Him. Those who loved Him did so with such careless, faint conviction and devotion that - despite all the signs of danger and desperate warnings all around Him - when Jesus needed them most, they were confused, scattered, and demoralized, and they betrayed, denied, and abandoned Him. The True King died all alone, without one single friend - without one single subject standing beside Him to object to what was going on, or to defend Him. There is nothing ethereal or difficult to understand here. It is just too hard to face ... too hard to admit ... too hard to repent.

But among other things, that is what the Cross truly meant to His first followers. They had been given the opportunity - not in theory, not in some mystical way, but in flesh and blood - to declare Him their King and Messiah, and they had missed it badly. The result was horrible beyond endurance. He didn’t just die for them in story or song - He died because they had let Him down. They knew He was their Rightful King, and they had not shown up for Him. They abandoned and deserted

Him. The reality of that blasted them out of whatever remained of their old lives and values and self-will. They had been given the choice of living for this True King, and they had not taken it. So when the choice came again, after His Resurrection, THEY TOOK IT. Indeed they did! Never again would they leave or betray Him for the world's threats or favors. They made mistakes, but they also lived and died *for Him* - no longer for themselves, and no longer for anyone else, unless they thought it was His will. And it has been so ever since, for anyone who has come from Palm Sunday to the Cross.

One more thing: If we get it clear, know the principles, and choose Him for our King - what about faithfulness in following Him? On Palm Sunday, Jesus reveals a major principle of the Kingdom: He sets before us, in the real world, an authentic choice. He gives us A TRUE CHANCE, and makes the offer authentic. If we have chosen Him as our King, aren't we to follow this same principle in every area of life where we have mission, purpose, authority, opportunity? That is, should we not be offering people a true chance to live a WAY different from what's going on all around them? To set before people a true chance to choose Him as their King? And I don't mean in some wooden formula or creed. Palm Sunday was powerful precisely because it was so carefully thought out and implemented, and was a real choice in a real situation - right in the middle of all the realities, power plays, threats, and structures of a very real world. Will that not require of us what it required of Jesus: hours of thought and prayer, the help of friends, courage, trust in God, trust in God's future? And should we not also be aware that people will often hate us for it, fight us over it, abuse and malign us because of it? And can we not also trust and pray that some of them will eventually change their hearts and minds? I don't doubt for one minute that even though Jesus knew it was possible - and eventually certain - that He would be killed for offering us the authentic choice to choose Him for our King, He also knew that thousands, and then millions, would redeem that failure and enter His Kingdom before they were through here.

Do you not set such higher choices before your children? And do they always hug you and love you for it? Not always at first, you say? Do we not find ways where we work to put a higher, better WAY of doing things before our associates? And do they always thank us, and help us to move things in that direction? Not always at first, you say? Everywhere you go, wherever you have gifts or opportunity, are you designing a mini-Palm Sunday, with Jesus as King, with His values and purposes as the true goal?

Of course! That's why life is so exciting - and why you are always in so much trouble. And it's also why some people keep circling back around, becoming dearer and deeper friends than you ever imagined possible in your former life. And that's why you discover that Jesus is still right beside you, doing with you, and through you, what He has always done: the Redeemer, the Reconciler, the Messiah, the Christ of God.

Jesus will be King only if we choose Him - of our own free will. He was able to make this choice - the choice of choosing Him for our King - available to all humans, down through all generations. Every Palm Sunday reminds us: He is still our Rightful Priest and King. And each of us, in every new generation, still has the chance to decide whether to claim Him as our King or to go on serving the usurpers. That's the eerie and incredible new dimension of Jesus' Messiahship: It is not earthbound or landlocked. It is a Kingdom not of this world, and yet it is here and real and waiting for us just the same. Convert ... switch allegiance ... turn will and life over to Him ... tune to the purposes and values of His rule - because He is HERE. His Kingdom has come, and it is available to all who choose it. And it is a Kingdom that does not end.

PRAYER

Well Lord, are we ready to welcome You? From out of the dim corridors of an ancient heritage, we remember hearing it. From passionate prophets of unyielding devotion, we remember hearing it. From men whose faith was so bright, even thousands of years ago, that we still remember their names, though we don't always remember why - from Jeremiah and Isaiah and Paul, we remember hearing it: *"You are the potter ... we are the clay."*

Thy Kingdom come, Lord, and finally with our full agreement, our desire, our rejoicing, our cooperation. Much as we need and appreciate Your endless love, we long for the day when You can come to us and not be crucified. Much as we need and appreciate the proof of Your true authority and power, we long for the day when we can know with confidence that Your love is for all eternity. So ride in on us again, this day, and we will try one more time not to turn You away. Then teach us how to pray and what to do when the world tries to steal You away from us again, in the night, when we aren't looking. Give us courage, also, to sing, *"Hosanna! Blessed be He who comes in the name of the Lord!"* Amen.