

NO KING BUT CAESAR

I really love Palm Sunday. It is a wonderful thing, to me, that Jesus made an authentic bid for the leadership of the nation. He gave us a chance to elect Him President. At first blush, we assume we would rather have Him for President than whomever we *have* been getting. Of course, the story is about how that is not really true.

Nevertheless, I am glad that there was a large contingent of people who wanted Jesus to be their leader. For me, Palm Sunday is the symbol and reminder of how the story should have unfolded – how Jesus' coming should have turned out – with Jesus accepted and anointed as our High Priest and King. I hope we always end Palm Sunday renewing the vows, saying to Jesus: “We blew it once – missed it – and ruined it beyond words to describe, or tears to mourn. But we claim it again now. You are our King, and we will never again recant it or deny it or turn away from You.”

I love Palm Sunday. I love it because I believe it can still be claimed and fulfilled. It is our only hope. Even Easter is for nothing unless we use it to return to Palm Sunday and get it right – and make it stick.

I have spoken of that as clearly as I know how for several years running. Doubtless I will try again next year. But you have noticed that the Scripture reading this morning jumps past Palm Sunday, to five days later. *We* always know, in our celebrations, what none of Jesus' friends or disciples knew on Palm Sunday: that it would not last – that, in this world, Jesus could not claim or maintain political leadership without force of arms. Jesus knew it, but He was unwilling to claim leadership on that basis. He insists that either we want Him – choose Him of our own free will – or He will not lead us. How many times have we learned this, even in our personal prayers? So Palm Sunday is tragedy in the making. Some of us think it is the worst tragedy our world has ever known – not in quantity, of course, but we think the *quality* of the tragedy is the worst we have ever known.

It troubles me deeply that the vast majority of Protestant Christians know very little of the depth of such things. Christmas *can* be a celebration of the whole drama – the Incarnation, and all that it entails and implies. But this is seldom what modern Christmas is about. In most places, it is warm fuzzies, full of parties and presents and signifying nothing – at least nothing beyond human warmth and gathering, much as we love those. Who has *ever* been converted by Christmas?!

And then at this time of year, most people jump straight from Palm Sunday to Easter: from cheering a King they know doesn't make it, to celebrating a Resurrection they are not sure they believe in. Even if they do believe in it, it is vague and other-worldly and has very little to do with anything in the here and now. Besides, who wants to be serious on Easter? So the vast majority of Protestant Christians leap from Palm Sunday to Easter – from peak to peak – and only a tiny handful descend into the valley during the week in between – into Maundy Thursday and Good Friday – to find out what it is really all about. If they are asked “Why do we call Him Savior?” or “How does He save us?” – they give you a glassy, froggy stare, as if you had just crawled out from under a rock in the dark ages. Or worse, they themselves chant some formula from the dark ages, though they themselves cannot give you the slightest hint about what the words of the chant might really mean. Mostly it boils down to: “Well, actually, Jesus just helps us to feel good about ourselves, so we can be calmer and more effective – make more money and be successful.” Oh. Well ... of course! Why didn't I think of that? Kind of a “Like Savior, like people” sort of thing.

Today we will talk about the valley of events between Palm Sunday and Easter. I don't know if it will help, but more and more of you are asking questions. I am grateful for that. I am grateful that we are not a shallow, keep-it-on-the-happy-surface church. Jesus *is* Savior and we are His people, and we want to know more and more about Him and His WAY all the time.

On Palm Sunday, crowds are shouting “*Hosanna!*” This means, literally, “Save us now, we pray!” Who would *you* shout that to, if you were in the midst of crowds in first-century Palestine, and He was riding His donkey through the Golden Gate of the Jerusalem wall and into the temple square, and people were waving palm branches (symbol of royalty) and throwing garments before Him – their version of rolling out the red carpet? Who do you shout “Save us!” TO? Your stockbroker? Your mother-in-law? Your next-door neighbor? No. You shout it to the Messiah, the Anointed One – the Rightful King, sent by God.

When and where, in the normal course of our Sundays, do we ponder the fact that an equally adamant and vociferous crowd – not made up of the same people, of course, but only five days later – is shouting “*We have no king but Caesar!*”? They are shouting this to a man named Pilate, because Pilate is acting like he wants to set this same Messiah – Jesus – free.

Pontius Pilate was the fifth prefect (governor) of Judea (and also of Samaria and Idumea). His term was from A.D. 26-36. His headquarters were at Caesarea – the Roman capital of Palestine, sixty-four miles northwest of Jerusalem – a beautiful port city on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea.

Pilate came to Jerusalem at Passover time every year with extra troops. The first time this happened, the soldiers came at night and set up their banners (standards) and a bust of the Roman Emperor in the sacred city. This so offended the Jews that they staged a massive peaceful protest at Caesarea, lying down and baring their necks when Pilate's soldiers came forward to disperse them with unsheathed swords. (Sorry, it didn't start with Gandhi.) And the passive resistance succeeded; the standards were removed. Of course, Pilate also knew he would be in trouble if reports got back to Rome that he was unjust or ineffective. That made a difference.

But the influx of pilgrims and visitors at Passover time always gave rise to disorder and provided increased opportunity for Jewish uprisings. Pilate's ten-year effort to bring peace and order to Palestine was not successful. While much of the world appreciated Roman law and prosperity, most of Judaism hated foreign domination on any terms. Pilate's reaction to this opposition was frequently brutal. If frustrated, worried, or confused, Pilate's usual reaction was to call in more soldiers – to rattle some swords, make object lessons, kill some people. We can easily imagine him saying, "The only thing these people understand is brute force." At least it seems to be the only thing Pilate understood.

Pilate did not change character or approach after meeting Jesus, much as some sentimental historical novelists would like to pretend. After slaughtering a host of unarmed Samaritans on Mount Gerizim – they had come to view relics of Moses, and he mistook them for a band of rebels – Pilate was summoned to Rome to stand trial. He was imprisoned after this trial, but we are not sure whether he committed suicide to escape execution at the hands of Caligula, or whether he was beheaded under Nero. In any case, Pilate did not long outlive Jesus.

But at a peculiar Passover time three years earlier, Pilate was confronted with a strangely bewildering dilemma. The Jewish people brought forth an insurrectionist and demanded – virtually *forced* Pilate – to have Him killed. They made their appeal on the grounds that this man was an enemy of Caesar and of Rome. Incredible!

Can you picture it? A night council of priests and elders produce Jesus, bound, before Pilate at the praetorium (Tower of Antonia), Pilate's headquarters and audience hall in Jerusalem. They demand that Jesus be put to death as an enemy of Caesar. They themselves have jurisdiction over Jewish citizens, in ordinary circumstances. But under Roman occupation, they do not have the right to inflict the death penalty. Pilate must order his soldiers to carry out the death penalty.

They are in a hurry. This must be done before Passover begins. They cannot even wait until morning, or for a proper audience, or for a decent trial. Humans have learned, in every land, throughout the ages: when we get in that kind of hurry, under that kind of pressure; when nothing is adding up right, and there are lots of unanswered questions that normally would have answers; when there is a raucous, insistent note – *Do it now! This can't wait! We have no time to waste! You are bad if you hesitate! You will be disgraced if you don't act instantly! Do it now! Only a traitor would hesitate!* – when that happens, you can smell the sulfur. In such an atmosphere, Satan cannot be very far away.

Clearly, Pilate is suspicious. It is unlikely that he cares personally what happens to Jesus. But he cannot understand, and therefore does not trust, what is happening. “What has this man done?” he asks. “He is perverting the nation,” they say. (Luke 23:2, 14) How terrible! Here He is, one lone man, all by Himself ... nobody to defend Him, nobody to protest on His behalf. But He is perverting the nation – poor nation! He is also accused of telling people not to pay their taxes. He is reportedly claiming Himself to be a King. Clearly the delegation is charging that this man is setting Himself up against Caesar. Yet here stands this one lone man, bound, bloody – a threat to Rome? Pilate doesn't get it. What are they up to? Does this man have some importance Pilate doesn't know about? Is He somehow a friend of Rome, and Pilate will be dishonored when it becomes known that he killed this man? What are they trying to pull? What are they up to?

Pilate tries to get Jesus to talk to him so he can get some hint or clue about what is really happening. Jesus is virtually silent. Pilate tries to be magnanimous. He finds no fault in this man. Maybe that will smoke out some of the real issues. I mean, if Jesus really *had* said something negative about taxes (which we doubt), is that startling? Would any of *you* be in trouble, if that were a crime?

The accusers remain relentless. To gain time, Pilate sends Jesus to Herod. Technically, Herod has jurisdiction over Galileans, but Herod sends Him back. Desperately, Pilate looks for some way out. He is sure it's some kind of Jewish trap; he is self-centered enough to think it must be about him. So he stalls for time. He tries to declare Jesus innocent. He tries to sidetrack the proceedings with a trumped-up release, but only Barabbas benefits. Finally, Pilate tries one last ruse: he has Jesus flogged. Sometimes the reality of blood and suffering will shock people out of their anger, bringing forth sympathy, causing people to reconsider their aims. But this time, no compassion is forthcoming. One final time, Pilate protests that he sees no cause for a death sentence.

Then the accusers come forth with one of their real issues: "He has made himself the Son of God." To the Jews, this is blasphemy; to Pilate, this is something only the Emperor would claim. But now Pilate is really worried. He knows the other charges are false. This must be some kind of in-fight over issues he has nothing to do with. Yet Pilate seems superstitious enough to be worried by the sheer mystery of it. He tries one more time to get Jesus to talk to him. Jesus' words, under the circumstances, are mystical, and alarming. Again Pilate tries to release Him. And that brings us to the weird, uncanny closing scenario:

"If you release this man, you are not Caesar's friend!"
they cry out.

"Shall I crucify your King?" Pilate asks.

"We have no king but Caesar."

That rips it. What else can be said? Then Pilate hands Him over to be crucified.

It brings me to my knees. I weep in utter dismay and despair – not just for then or for them, but for me and for now! We have no king but Caesar? Is that the only way to get rid of Him? It is indeed the only way to get rid of Him. And it is how we *have been* getting rid of Him, from then until now. We have no king but Caesar! This world is our god; getting along here is our only purpose or concern. And once we have settled for that, we can never see any higher – we can never see beyond it. There are things more evil and more dramatic, but this is perhaps the worst, the saddest, the bleakest statement in all the New Testament: *"We have no king but Caesar."*

Here are the most uncooperative, ungrateful, stiff-necked, rebellious people in all the Roman Empire. They resent every Roman soldier in their land. They despise every effort to bring foreign culture, no matter how enlightened. They hate Roman taxes despite the fact that much of them are used for their benefit. These are *not* Caesar's friends. They never have been. They never will be. I like them for that. But isn't it ironic? Suddenly one night, in the twinkling of an eye, they all turn into loyal Roman patriots. They apprehend this dangerous enemy of Caesar's. They care only for the welfare of Rome. Despite everything the Roman Governor can do to stop them, they insist on proving their great loyalty and affection for Caesar and the Empire, declaring finally: "*We have no king but Caesar.*" No wonder Pilate is nervous!

Pilate never does understand what's going on. He may have been impressed by Jesus, but the fate of one stranger is not his real concern. If the Jewish leaders want Jesus killed, it is obviously not because He is a threat to Rome – Pilate can be sure of that. The request to release Barabbas is proof of that. But why do they want Jesus dead so badly? Pilate *has* to wonder if he is being set up. Will he end up being blamed for the death of an innocent man who is somehow important to his superiors?

Trying to cover his own tracks the best he can, Pilate finally seals Jesus' fate. Certainly he cannot afford to have the Jewish leaders complaining to Rome that he is a friend of insurrectionists. So he washes his hands, with no damage done, except to his curiosity ... *and* to the Prince of the Universe. But on the surface, Pilate handles it well. In the three years left to him, Pilate will have no reason to regret his decision. Very possibly, he never thought about the incident again.

Less than forty years later, the false cry that nobody really meant took a strange, cruel twist into reality. Between 68 and 70 A.D., Roman legions marched into Israel and destroyed the nation so utterly that no political state of Israel existed afterward for nearly two thousand years. "*We have no king but Caesar*" indeed!

As it turned out, the Jewish leaders were essentially correct in their charges. They would have been dumbfounded to know that. In fact, Jesus and His followers *did* overthrow the Roman Empire. It was with a strange kind of power, but it still worked. Three centuries later, the Roman Emperor Constantine would acknowledge Jesus as Lord and Christ, and as King over his own life. A strange thing, after all the mad

and cruel tyrants who had been claiming themselves to be gods. What if someone could have shown a news clip of this event to the court on that day when Pilate finally sentenced Jesus to death?

This story, I hope we know, is not about Jews or Romans. It is about human beings, and it is about life on the planet earth. Whenever and wherever the Lord Christ comes, it changes our ways, threatens all other securities, and frightens us with challenges and possibilities for which we have no adequate traditions or defenses. The story is what it is, and the events have already locked in to become the source and catalyst of all subsequent history. But the story is also ours on a personal level. The vast pattern of effects works itself out in our own small and daily trials as well. In spiritual crisis, three things happen when we run from God and try to keep God from taking over, making claims on our lives, and bringing his Kingdom into our lives:

1.) First, we confuse ourselves on purpose. We start telling lies, knowing we do not mean them. We throw dust in the air, claim things we do not mean, pretend stances we do not really hold – anything to get rid of Him; anything to shut out that Presence which calls to the very highest within us.

2.) Second, we align ourselves with things we detest. Why would faithful Jewish people, sincere and devout, have anything to do with a Pilate or a Herod, with Roman courts or Roman execution? Normally they held utter scorn and scathing disrespect for the quality and character of these men. They had to stoop very low to get this thing done. How very unlike them. How very unlike us – in the moments we forget and claim we have no King except earthly success, however we happen to be picturing it at the moment.

3.) Third, there are repercussions when we make false vows and turn from what we truly value and believe, even though we think it won't count because we know we don't really mean it. On spiritual levels, it is hard to cheat. Some say impossible.

It is one of the saddest cries in human language: “*We have no king but Caesar.*” Nothing to live for but this world; no purpose greater than material survival; no destiny beyond sleep at the end of a meaningless day. Caesar always exists in our world, in one guise or another: success, money, pleasing people, getting ahead. I like the roads and the irrigation ditches he builds. I pay him taxes, more willingly than many. I have often

imagined that if I put my mind to it – spent more time and energy serving Caesar better – I might get to go to Rome one day. And they say it is very impressive there.

Only, Caesar is not my King. Like you, I have another King far greater than Caesar. So when I hear myself, inside or out, yelling the opposite, it is time to start looking around for Jesus – bound, bleeding, awaiting condemnation and execution. The only way to get Him out of our lives is to kill Him – one way or another.

So sometimes I need to see the juxtaposition – the contrast – between the cry of “*Hosanna!*” and the cry of “*We have no king but Caesar!*” One is the alternative to the other. I suspect that if we could see it really clearly, we would realize that we are in fact making one cry or the other *in every situation*. Of course, most of the world does not realize this, most of the time. Which is precisely why Palm Sunday turned out the way it did in the first place.

As for us, let us end this day reclaiming our rightful King – and crying “*Hosanna!*” and meaning it this time, so that the world cannot steal Him from us ever again.