

Palm Sunday

Having just experienced St. Luke's Passion, his account of the death and burial of Jesus, it's hard to say anything more. Yet our faith demands that we try to make sense out of what has happened. Jesus has been betrayed by someone close to him, and has been put to a painful death. We cannot ignore our own complicity in that death, having shouted "Crucify him"!

Of course, we can just pretend nothing happened and move on. A few weeks ago, in the middle of Lent, I was driving down a street in Davenport and saw a yard sign that said, "Celebrating Easter – Jesus is Risen!" It had the name of a big-box church and a listing of service times. It struck me as very odd. Jesus hadn't even died yet and they were already celebrating the resurrection.

I understand the temptation. The grief of Jesus' death is almost too much to bear. Our culture prefers to deny death. Yet loss is a basic fact of earthly life whether we like it or not. On Palm Sunday we enter the heart of how our faith helps us deal with loss. So let's not be tempted to jump to Easter Day.

Each version of the Passion of Christ is slightly different. In Luke's telling that we heard this morning, Jesus stands out as a righteous man who suffers as a martyr. On the cross Jesus forgives those who condemned him and has a conversation with those crucified with him. One of the criminals gets even more than he asked for. He will be in Paradise with Jesus that very day.

Only in Luke do we find the heartrending scene between Peter and Jesus. After Peter denied Jesus for the third time, the cock crowed. Luke tells us that the Lord turned and looked at Peter. Jesus *looked at* Peter. And Peter remembered how Jesus had predicted his betrayal and how much he had protested. Peter was heartbroken. He ran out and wept bitterly.

As Luke tells it, Jesus never wavered in his trust in God. Matthew and Mark both record the cry of dereliction from Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In Luke, Jesus quotes Psalm 31 as his last words: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." The crowd goes away grieving. The centurion underscores Jesus' innocence, an innocence proclaimed earlier by both Pilate and Herod. There is no question that a righteous man has died.

We know the end of this story, but let us not jump to it too soon. If we follow that big-box church and quickly rush toward Easter, we lose track of our own complicity in Jesus' death. We forget our own betrayals, our own denials of the righteous one. We lose the power of Good Friday. Better that we commend ourselves into the hands of God as Jesus did. One of the most powerful prayers in the *Book of Common Prayer* expresses this hope beautifully. It comes at the end of the Good Friday liturgy. I will leave you with that prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, we pray you to set your passion, cross, and death between your judgment and our souls, now and in the hour of our death. Give mercy and grace to the living; pardon and rest to the dead; to your holy Church peace and concord; and to us sinners everlasting life and glory; for with the Father and the Holy Spirit you live and reign, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

[Palm Sunday: The Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Luke 22:14 - 23:56.]