

Palm Sunday

What “following Jesus” Really Means

Note: This chapter from Prayers for Progressive Christians is reprinted with permission and enthusiastic blessings from Michael Morwood.

We need to be discerning about the Gospel accounts of Palm Sunday. We need to discern what most likely never happened, what could have happened, and what did happen. This prayer highlights the latter.

The historical event was that a prophetic Jewish teacher with a message about the need for religious and social reform here and now, went to Jerusalem willing to take a stand for his beliefs whatever the consequences.

This is a very Jewish story.

Decades after Jesus died, a different story about that event arose; a story about the triumphant “Christ” entering Jerusalem, the Savior of the world who would die for our sins and gain access to God’s heavenly dwelling place.

That is a very non-Jewish story.

In its celebration of Palm Sunday, Christianity opted for the “Christ” story rather than the story about a man and his reason for going to Jerusalem. As “story” we can readily enter in the “Christ” story and be moved by its themes of recognition, joy, celebration, welcome, hope, discipleship, fickleness, and recognize the contrast with Pilate’s ostentatious entrance into the city.

However, a danger lies in traditional emphasis on this story. The danger lies in not being challenged enough by Jesus’ radical preaching, in mistaking what he really died for, in being too comfortable with a glorious Savior figure who “saves” the world. The danger is all too evident in some supposedly Christian countries where greed, profit, bullying, oppressing the powerless and ravaging the earth flow from political and economic systems that Jesus would denounce.

Palm Sunday invites us to consider what calling oneself a “Christian” or a follower of Jesus is really about. Let’s wave our palm branches for the right reason.

Readings: The Jewish Story

Isaiah 58; 4-8

You shouldn’t fast as you are doing today if you want to make your voice heard on high. Is this the kinds of fast I choose, a day of self-affliction, of bending one’s head like a reed and of lying down in mourning clothing and ashes? Is this what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? Isn’t this the fast I choose: releasing wicked restraints, untying the ropes of a yoke, setting free the mistreated, and breaking every yoke? Isn’t it sharing your bread with the hungry and bringing the homeless poor into your house, covering the naked when you see them, and not hiding from your own family? Then your light will break out like the dawn, and you will be healed quickly. Your own righteousness will walk before you, and the Lord’s glory will be your rear guard.

Isaiah 61: 1-4

God’s spirit is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim release for captives, and liberation for prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor and a day of vindication for our God, to comfort all who mourn, to provide for Zion’s mourners, to give them a crown in place of ashes, oil of joy in place of mourning, a mantle of praise in place of discouragement. They will be called Oaks of Righteousness, planted by the Lord to glorify himself. They will rebuild the ancient ruins; they will restore formerly deserted places.

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Jesus the Jew's Story

Matthew 5; 1-4

Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up a mountain. He sat down and his disciples came to him. He taught them, saying:

Happy are the people who are hopeless, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs

Happy are people who grieve, because they will be made glad.

Happy are people who are humble, because they will inherit the earth.

Happy are people who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness, because they will be fed until they are full.

Happy are people who show mercy, because they will receive mercy

Happy are people who have pure hearts, because they will see God.

Happy are people who make peace, because they will be called God's children.

Happy are people whose lives are harassed because they are righteous, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

Happy are you when people insult you and harass you and speak all kinds of bad and false things about you, all because of me. Be full of joy and be glad, because you have a great reward in heaven. In the same way, people harassed the prophets who came before you.

You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its saltiness, how will it become salty again? It's good for nothing

except to be thrown away and trampled under people's feet.

You are the light of the world.

Prayer

We gather today
Mindful of many times
We have professed our readiness
To be true disciples of Jesus
To be salt of the earth
To be light in the world.

We acknowledge the daunting challenge
Of this profession
In the society in which we live,
With its economic systems
That impoverish and disempower people,
And its political systems
That enable the rich to get richer
And the earth to become poorer.

We remember that Jesus
Encountered in his day
Systems as unjust as those
We experience in our day,
And who surely felt powerless
To change anything on his own.

We turn our hearts and minds
To his message
To his hopes and dreams
To his ardent desires
For a better society.

We focus on his struggle
His reflections
His prayer

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His questions-
 Where to start?
 How to start?
 What to say?
 Whom to choose?
 How to keep going?
 How to be salt?
 How to be light?

We call to mind
 How Jesus urged his listeners
 To put their trust
 In the power of being neighbor
 In the power of God’s Spirit within them
 In the power of conversion
 From religious thinking and practices
 That made them feel inadequate
 And worthless

Our prayer today
 Is a prayer of resolve,
 A prayer of determination
 That we, each one of us,
 Will do whatever we can
 However small
 In whatever way
 To bring the real dream of Jesus
 To fruition
 In our lives
 And in our world today.

At the start of Holy Week
 We focus on Jesus
 Human like us
 A man with a dream for a better world

A man of extraordinary courage
 A man on a journey to the end of his life
 A man willing to die for what he believed
 A man who knew
 He would never see his dream fulfilled
 A man who had to trust that those who came after
 him
 Would keep his dream alive.

As we gather once more around bread and wine
 We recall Jesus sharing bread and wine
 With his friends
 Shortly before he died.
 He invited them to eat and drink
 As a sign of their readiness
 To keep his memory alive
 To give their all
 For what he believed and taught.

We, too, eat and drink.
 We stand up
 As a sign of our readiness to be counted upon.
 We give our word.

By our eating and drinking
 We commit ourselves
 To follow where Jesus dared to journey.

