



SAINT LUKE'S

PALM SUNDAY
YEAR A

THE LITURGY OF THE PALMS
MATTHEW 21:1-11
PSALM 118:1-2, 19-29

THE LITURGY OF THE WORD
ISAIAH 50:4-9A
PSALM 31:9-16
PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11
MATTHEW 26:14-27:66 OR 27:11-54

A SERMON BY THE REV. WILLIAM OGBURN
APRIL 9, 2017

In the Name God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Today we celebrate the Liturgy of the Palms and we also hear again the Passion reading of our Lord's Crucifixion. It is such a stark contrast between the joy of hailing Jesus as our King and then grimly executing him as a criminal. This comparison makes me uncomfortable, but it is something that we just have to sit with and hold. And perhaps this day, this celebration of sorts, holds within it the whole human predicament: 'how to be,' how to live in the space between exalting Jesus and killing him.

Shakespeare sees part of this human problem when Hamlet says "To be or not to be; that is the question." But philosopher Abraham Heschel points out, the question of 'to be or not to be' is something that concerns, not humans, but animals: that is to say it concerns mere survival. The question for humans, however as Heschel says, is 'HOW to be or HOW not to be.'¹

The question of "how to be and how not to be" has everything to do with our relationship to God and to each other. In the summary of the law, Jesus says 'love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind ~ and to love your neighbor as yourself.'² But notice it starts with loving God. When we are focused on God, then we can treat each other with the love, grace, mercy, and justice that God has shown us. Jesus' life teaches us about being in right relationship with God and each other.

An Anglican theologian named Herbert McCabe proposes a brilliant argument in his book *God Matters* when he says that Jesus, not Adam, "*was the first human being, the first member of the human race in whom humanity came to fulfillment, the first human being for who to live was simply to love – for this is what human beings are*

¹ Heschel, Abraham, *Who is Man?*

² Paraphrase Matthew 22:37-40

for.”³ Jesus’ whole life was love. He fully lived into his humanity. And we...well, we couldn’t stand it.

Jesus was a threat to the political system of his day. The Jewish people were devoutly awaiting the arrival of the Messiah, a king who would free them. The problem was that they did not recognise this in the person of Jesus. They were looking for a warrior King to fight off imperialistic oppression. Jesus came, not as that warrior King, but as the Prince of Peace, bathed in God’s love. Basically, many saw Jesus as a threat to society because of what seemed to them as “monstrous egoism,”⁴ despite that, at least in Mark’s Gospel, he continually calls himself, ‘Son of Man,’ not ‘Son of God.’ You see, the true love of God breaks down the barriers that society constructs. God’s love stands in opposition to the ways in which we compartmentalize ourselves and others in society into systems of race, class, gender, sexuality, and dare I say even denominations. Jesus challenged the social constructs. So why did Jesus die? Jesus died because the political system who had power over him found him subversive nuisance, which was reason enough to have him crucified.⁵

Irenaeus, a second century bishop, said, “The Glory of God is the Human Being Fully Alive.”⁶ It is clear throughout the Gospels that Jesus did not want to die. The Gospels make it clear that Jesus was not seeking death; it was never his aim in his ministry. However, it becomes clear to Jesus that death will be unavoidable. In John’s Gospel, he seems calmer about his pending death, but in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus is clearly panicked and terrified. In the Passion according to Matthew he cries out, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.”⁷

This is what is so amazing about Jesus. He didn’t want to die, and yet, he

³ McCabe, Herbert, *God Matters*

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ “Gloria Dei est vivens homo.” Preserved from Irenaeus.

⁷ Matthew 26: 39

could not deny his humanity to fully love and to fully live. Had he denounced his radical message of God's love and run away in hiding, he would have been less than the full human God made him, the full human God called him to be. He would have been human like we are human, fallible and disobedient. Jesus didn't stop doing God's will of being fully human just because it would lead to his death. That is the mind-blowing nature of Jesus' obedience.

I do not believe it was not God's will that Jesus die. God was not pleased or appeased in any way when Jesus died. I'd argue that, in fact, God was offended. The crucifixion was an affront to God. Killing Jesus, the one whom God sent to us to teach us to be more fully alive and more fully human, was the most egregious thing we could have done ~ and God's heart was broken. The will of God for Jesus was to live. This is why Jesus was born incarnate: to show us how to be fully human...to show us how God intends for us to be...to show us how to love God and each other and to let God and others love us with such a love as only divinity could prove to us.

Like looking through a prism, there are many ways at looking at what happened theologically at the crucifixion of Jesus, but the Western Church has long been dominated by an atonement theology that says that God was somehow appeased and satisfied by Jesus' death, as if God is some kind of angry mountain deity who thirsts for human blood. That is nothing of the Living God that we know in Jesus, because that is not worthy of God. Herbert McCabe also points out, "If God will not forgive us until his son has been tortured to death for us then God is a lot less forgiving than even we are sometimes. ... And if God is satisfied and compensated for sin by the suffering of mankind in Christ, he is [vengeful in an infantile way]." The Good News is that this is not the God we know, love, worship, and adore, the God we know through Jesus Christ. It's time for us to turn the prism and look at this through other angles.

Jesus didn't want to die. It was not God's will that Jesus die. Christ's self-emptying on the cross was in obedience to living a life of love. It was we who wanted Jesus to die. We didn't want Jesus the way we got him. We expected him to be what we wanted instead of how he came: which was not what we wanted him, but as we needed him.

If we are followers of Jesus, we have to take a look at our own humanity. Why do we settle for being less than human? Why do we allow shame and fear to rob us of who we were created to be? Why do we fail to challenge the social constructs that divide us? Why are we so scared to love others like Jesus did?

I think we are scared of love because it costs us something. McCabe says, "We need and deeply want to be loved and to love, and yet when that happens it seems a threat, because we are asked to give ourselves up, to abandon ourselves, and so when we meet love, we kill it."⁸

As an Easter people, we know the story does not end on the cross. But we can't skip over the intense suffering, the tearful agony, the gorey blood, and the bitter scourging. We have to be part of it, otherwise it makes Christ's death cheap. We have to own our own part in the crucifixion.

How, as followers of Jesus, are we at being fully alive and full of Christ's love? I hope we will examine that aspect of our lives as we walk the way of the Cross this Holy Week. Are we taking up our cross and following Jesus out of selfishness and into selflessness? I pray that all of us can examine our lives this week and look for ways for us to live more fully – and to love God and our neighbour more wholly.

⁸ McCabe, *God Matters*.

“The Glory of God is the Human Being Fully Alive.” This is what Jesus shows us on the cross. He is fully alive, fully human, fully loving – and fully the Glory of God.

Let us pray:

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.*⁹

⁹ *Book of Common Prayer, Good Friday Office, 282.*

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