

The Jesus Way of Being Christ, Luke 19:28-48

March 20, 2016: Palm Sunday

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Introduction

In 2016 our preaching focus is on how the New Testament describes problems in the church, and how they are solved. As we read in Philippians 2, the more we put on the same attitude as Jesus Christ the fewer problems we will have being the church. The attitude of love and service that Jesus had, is displayed in the events between Palm Sunday and Easter, with his suffering and death on the cross for our sakes.

Today's gospel describes two precursors to the Church in the Faith of Israel; the disciples of Jesus shouting his praise, and the temple, with its leaders and its merchants. I suggest this morning that too much of the Church today, especially in western culture, stands with those who have turned the temple into a marketplace. Not enough of the Church is standing with the crowd of disciples, waving and singing, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD."

It is too easy to point to a megachurch with a coffee shop and a bookstore and accuse them. I don't mean to do that. In fact I appreciate the kingdom witness of the evangelical megachurches and their pastors, including both Bill Hybels and Rick Warren, whose books I have read and still appreciate. I have never hidden that appreciation from you. What I mean instead is that when a church is taken over by envy for its privileged role in society, it loses the attitude of Jesus Christ who had come to serve others and even to die for them. Such a church stands with the money-changers in the Temple market; this envy darkens the church's witness to the joy, mercy and grace of life with God for God's people.

Let us pray: Lord God, may your word transform our minds, and may your power redeem our bodies, revive the church, and renew the earth in Jesus' name, Amen.

1. The Disciples

Luke states that the miracles Jesus performed were a big reason why he had a following. These miracles showed that God's power and God's love were present in Jesus. These were not stunts or illusions to impress people; these were redemptive actions that made the blind see and the lepers whole, that expelled demons, fed the hungry and calmed the storms. This is why, as Luke writes, **"The whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: 'Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!'"**

But this crowd really does not know what they are about. At that moment of triumph and of celebration, no one but Jesus himself was imagining it would all lead to an arrest, a trial and a cross. I am not sure how many Christians today really have all that deep a knowledge either; when we are on a roll, and feeling the momentum of our joy especially as new believers perhaps, it is hard to imagine that we will be asked to take up and share in a cross of suffering. Even so, the entry into Jerusalem is a holy moment in the story of Jesus and in the life of those who follow him –then, and now. Their knowledge might not have been deep, but their hope was deep. They knew that in Jesus they had seen God at work again in the midst of Israel.

In the Gospel of Luke Jesus begins his ministry by reading out from Isaiah 61, in which the Christ restores sight to the blind, preaches good news to the poor, and sets free the oppressed. Isaiah 61 is the program for the Jesus way of being Christ. In Luke there are two events that take place shortly before he enters Jerusalem which many in the crowd would know about: first he restores sight to a blind man, just like in Isaiah 61, and second, he makes Zaccheus, a tax collector, his disciple.

Here is how the Zaccheus story fits the Isaiah 61 program. Jesus frees the oppressed by changing the heart of the oppressor. Zaccheus makes his promise of discipleship: “Look Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.” With the heart of the oppressor converted, those he had robbed have their property restored, and the poor of the city are given immediate relief. This is also one of the miracles that has the crowd rejoicing. On one hand, healed eyes, on the other hand, a healed heart, displayed the redemptive power and love of God.

The Jesus way of being Christ is to release the oppressed by transforming their oppressors into partners. One term for this is “reconciliation.” The Jesus way is to win the enemy over with conviction and conversion, calling forth the oppressor’s voluntary surrender to God. The Jesus way of being Christ is not popular in a world where justice means the oppressed and the oppressor switch places, whether by a war or by an election. The Jesus way of being Christ takes the more difficult path of forgiveness, the longer path of relationship, the riskier path that speaks truth to power without having any power to leverage, except the power of God. But the Jesus way is not popular in the Church either; the Church too often clings to the world’s way.

2. The Stones

When Jesus states that if his followers were silent, the stones themselves would take up the same cry, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord,” the stones that Jesus refers to are not the pebbles he is walking on, but the stones of the city, Jerusalem and its temple. Jesus says this to those who were offended by his followers. In Luke and John it is Pharisees who are upset, and in Matthew it is the Chief Priests. Both groups are part of the Sanhedrin, which Rome had given the authority to rule over religious and cultural matters. Jesus’ reply to them says in effect, “My followers are right.” If no person hailed the Christ, Creation itself

would sing, for as Paul writes in Romans 8, Creation knows its redeemer. Then Jesus, looking over the city, had a warning for these same stones, for the Jesus Way of being Christ cannot abide it when his church, the people of faith, take part in oppressing the world.

These same Sanhedrin members rebuking the disciples of Jesus, had already filled the temple with unbelief. The Laws of Moses allow a pilgrim in Jerusalem to buy an animal for the sacrifices, but under the Roman regime this had been corrupted into a profit-making speculation by Jerusalem's merchants. The Sanhedrin had ruled that Roman coins could not be used in the temple because they were stamped with Roman faces of emperors whom the pagans revered as gods. So merchants traded coins with the people, for a fee.

Jesus entered the temple and fulfilled the Isaiah 61 program of setting free the oppressed, by overturning the currency exchanges and driving the animals out. This shows us that the Jesus way of being Christ means that the judgments of God begin in God's house. Many Christians want to see prosperity for their churches, and judgment to fall on the enemies of the faith. Some of us begin to sound like Jonah in his attitude to Nineveh when we speak with relish our wish to see some nation or other, an avowed enemy of Christians or of our nation, bombed into ruins. But if such things happen to others, why should they not happen to us? If the Temple and Sanhedrin came under judgment, so that one stone was not left on another, we are hardly exempt.

Yet churches have often shackled themselves to government in the hopes of taking shortcuts through worldly power. Rather than leavening the government with the Spirit of Christ, it happens over time that the church becomes leavened with the world's sin, the lust for power, and for profits through oppression. What happened when the Sanhedrin became the Roman Empire's puppet, happened in Europe in the Middle Ages. It happens whenever Christians steer worldly politics to make our faith convenient for ourselves at the expense of the freedom and conscience

of the unbelievers who surround us. Too many Christians stand with the market-place merchants, milking the angles of our privilege, and do not stand with the crowds hailing the King who heals the eyes of the blind and the hearts of the rich.

In the Jesus way of being Christ, repentant tax collectors who surrendered to God are part of the triumphal march into Jerusalem. Merchants whose profiteering was given the stamp of religious approval in collusion with the government, were chased out of the Temple by Jesus himself. Judgment begins in the household of faith. Have you not wondered, Elgin Covenant, where is the harvest of joy for all your sowing in tears? Across the nation Christians await a third great awakening that never comes, not in one hundred fifty years and counting. Perhaps we are too consumed with the marketplace and the arena of politics. When the LORD visits, will he find us throwing our coats down in welcome, or will he find us counting our money? So, if judgment must come on the church in order to make room for righteousness, in order to make room for the harvest, then let it come quickly, Lord, and the sooner the better, so that we can be revived and faithful.

Conclusion

As Palm Sunday Christians, let us put ourselves in the middle of the parade, and not in the midst of the money-changers. Like the disciples singing, "Blessed is the King," we might not know everything, but we can trust the power of God: power to give sight to the blind and to raise the dead; power to make the heart of the oppressor generous, to cleanse the oppressed of bitterness, and to reconcile us to one another.

Only Jesus knew where he was heading when he rode into Jerusalem. The crowd of disciples did not, the Sanhedrin did not, the money-changers did not. We know the story: his debates in the temple, his last supper, his arrest and the flight of the disciples, his trials and

tortures, his crucifixion and death, his resurrection, his appearances to re-ignite the fire of faith. But we do not know our own stories and where they will lead us. We do not know whether any of us will live to see a Third Great Awakening, or whether we must all instead bear God's judgment on the Church. Are we not withered and cold through lack of faith in God, and grown too much concerned for privilege and leverage in our world, our share in the market? I wonder, when evangelicals find our money-tables over-turned and our privileges curtailed, whether we will complain, "We're being persecuted!" or whether we will repent and start being disciples again.

If only we could know, and even choose, which crosses we might bear, but even that is out of our hands and beyond our knowing. Only Jesus knows our own futures. Yet we can have his attitude. We can stand with the crowd of disciples and wave our palms, because though we don't know everything, we do know that God's love and power are revealed in Jesus Christ, and we know that our futures include eternal glory with the Blessed, coming King. Amen.