

PALM SUNDAY

Luke 19:29-40; Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 23:1-49

There's nothing more exciting than a spectacular parade.

Television spectacles, like the Oscars, are something of a modern equivalent. We watch excitedly as new stars are born, and see them surrounded by the press and adoring followers.

We love heroes. We love following their lives, and marvel when they buy big homes and jet around the world.

It is also true that we get something of a thrill when these modern idols are exposed. We delight in their destruction.

Somehow it makes us feel better to know that the person who filled us with awe, is just another fallible, flawed human being. Palm Sunday, in the drama of lessons and ritual, takes us from strong admiration, to betrayal and desertion. We know that the very crowds who shout "Hosanna" will yell "Crucify him." One of Jesus' closest followers will betray him. Most of the disciples will desert when things get tough. The religious leaders, convinced that they are protecting Judaism from this upstart prophet, will plot with cynical Roman politicians to kill Jesus. When Jesus begins his journey into the Holy City, he is soon surrounded by excited crowds. They have heard that this prophet heals, feeds, raises from the dead. Perhaps he will solve all their problems. Perhaps he will throw the occupying Romans out and restore the Jewish Kingdom. Is this Man indeed the

Chosen One, the Messiah?

Others have pronounced themselves to be the Messiah, and have proven to be no such thing. Yet the hopes, aspirations, and demands of the people remain high. Maybe this time God will act. Jesus' followers were caught up in this excitement. All their fears about Jesus entering Jerusalem, his words about being killed there, are forgotten in the excitement of the reception.

They must have felt very important, those disciples, as the crowds cheered. One tortured soul, Judas, perhaps hangs back a bit. We don't know his dark motives. Was he jealous? Had some truth Jesus said to him, hurt him, and driven him to revenge?

In a few short days the crowds will decide that there's nothing in anything Jesus says or does that is good for them. The disciples, or almost all of them, will separate themselves from Jesus and run for cover. Judas will betray his Lord. The religious leaders and politicians will handle the matter with speed, and a man will die.

As the Service ends today, we can almost feel the dark pall of evil. There's no happy ending in the lessons. The roller coaster surge of the liturgy leaves us down and shaken.

We may well ask ourselves which role we play in this human drama. Do we test God, Jesus, the Spirit, in terms of "What is in it for me?" The crowd did. Do we resent the way the Faith accuses us, and wish we could silence Jesus, as Judas hoped?

Do we run from Jesus and hide behind self-preservation? How ironic it is that the religious leaders, and most of the disciples, acted from self-interest. The Chief Priests convinced themselves that an unholy murder was justified to safeguard the

institution. The disciples perhaps convinced themselves that if the work was to continue, they should protect themselves from arrest and punishment.

Over and over again, in the long story of the church, Christian people have acted the roles we encounter today, not just on Palm Sunday, but in the daily life of parishes, dioceses, and the national church.

The question posed by that old African American song, “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” points not to St. John and the Marys, but to the rest of us. How often have we deserted our church when we haven’t received the things we think we need? How often have we turned on clergy, or fellow Christians, when they have spoken the truth to us? How often have we put the institution, the church, before Jesus? How often have we just run away when things got tough? These sins are alive and well, and flourish today just as they did in Jesus’ day.

This isn’t an outdated story. This is life.

For a moment, just a moment, it is good that the lessons today end with death, with no hope, with Jesus alone and dying. For in this Holy Week, which begins today, we have much dying to do, and dying hurts, and dying risks the end of everything. Yet as a community of Christians here today, and as individuals, it is, as St Paul tells us, “in dying that we live.”

Let us then offer our selfishness, as a church and as individuals, through Jesus, to God, as we walk to the Cross, this Holy Week.

Then, in the silence of Good Friday, we will wait.

AMEN.