

A Sermon for The Sixth Sunday in Lent, April 9, 2006

Commonly Called Palm Sunday

The Rev. Stephen C. Scarlett

God proclaims through the prophet Hosea, “Your faithfulness is like a morning cloud. And like the dew it goes away” (6:4). Hosea presents a convicting image of the human tendency to be devoted to God at one moment, only, some short time later, to forget and abandon all duties of faith. The ground is soaked at 6:00 a.m. but it is dry by noon. Is our faithfulness like that?

The Palm Sunday liturgy provides a meditation on faithfulness. We are given two roles to play: the role of the exuberant crowd welcoming the Messiah into Jerusalem; and the role of the angry crowd driving the Messiah out of Jerusalem to the cross. As a hymn we sang last week said,

“Sometimes they strew his way And his sweet praises sing; Resounding all the day hosannas to their King; Then crucify, is all their breath And for his death they thirst and cry.”

And “they” are we. Yes, a particular generation of Jewish people handed over Jesus, a Jew, to be crucified. Yet, the Gentiles also gave their assent and executed the task. And it comes down to us in our tradition as a commentary on human nature. It is not merely what *they* did; it is what fallen man does to God in *our* rejection of his will for our lives.

We greet the promise of salvation with joy—even song—only some short time later to murmur about the first bump in the road to holiness. We are excited about Jesus and his promises to us. Then we encounter someone in the church who is a little difficult to deal with; or someone doesn’t recognize the full measure of our brilliance; or someone dares to hold us accountable; or we are pulled by some strong temptation; or God withdraws the sense of his presence for a short time to teach us patience. Then our exuberant faith come tumbling down like a house of cards. Then, “Praise the Lord!” becomes, “Why is God doing this to me?”

The ministry of the church is held together by those who are faithful; by those who persevere in worship, prayer and spiritual disciplines; by those who continue to serve, to man their posts, in good times and bad. The faithful also struggle, but they endure. They also fall, but they get back up. They keep their commitment of faith over time. As Jesus said, “Who then is that faithful and wise servant whom his Master made ruler over his household to give them their portion of meat in due season? Blessed is that servant, whom the Master, when he comes, will find so doing.”

We live in an unfaithful world. We are told that we should pursue those things that seem exciting in the present moment. And we are told that any lack of personal fulfillment is cause to abandon the right way and reject the commitment we made yesterday. This is fallen human nature as it is revealed in the contrast between the crowd on Palm Sunday and Good Friday. This is the way of Judas, who was drawn to follow Jesus but who turned on Jesus when he didn’t like what Jesus did.

In Revelation, Jesus is called the “Faithful Witness” (Revelation 1:5). He endured to the end. He was not derailed by opposition, temptation, discomfort or disappointment. As we meditate on his

faithfulness, we are convicted that our own faithfulness is like the morning dew. This will lead us to make a good confession during Holy Week.

Jesus Christ the faithful witness shows us the new way. He endured the cross and is now seated at the right hand of God (Hebrews 12:2). Holy Week teaches us that Palm Sunday leads to Good Friday. But it also teaches us that Good Friday leads to Easter. We must follow Jesus beyond the joy of initial enthusiasm, through temptation, betrayal, disappointment and affliction—that is, through the cross—to reach the joy that is called Easter.

As the Epistle (Philippians 2:5f,) says, “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.”