

WONDROUS LOVE

Year B, Palm Sunday / Sunday of the Passion

Mark 15:1-47

Worship in Holy Week, more so than worship at other times of the church year, seeks to place us inside the story we proclaim. We take our place in the Palm Sunday procession making its way into Jerusalem, voicing the acclamation of the first disciples as we wave palm leaves and sing a rousing song in praise of Jesus as our redeemer and king. Later this week we recall in the Maundy Thursday liturgy what has been termed the Last Supper, referring to the last meal Jesus shared with his disciples before he was handed over for the events recorded in this morning's Gospel. And although we anticipate Holy Communion with Jesus every time we gather at the Table in this place, on Maundy Thursday the Words of Institution in the prayer of blessing – “in the night in which he was betrayed” – take us quickly into the company of those few who sat at table with Jesus, two thousand years ago in the upper room in Jerusalem. When Julia Gill or I wash your feet this same night, you can close your eyes and fancy Jesus kneeling before you, loving you, caring for you, ministering to you, as he did with his first disciples. There is little that communicates Jesus' servanthood more directly, more intimately, than having him bow before you, receive your tired feet into his healing hands, and then have him wash away the cares and struggles of your day with the pouring of fresh, warm water, a fragrant soap, and finally the patting dry with a soft, warm towel.

On Good Friday morning, we assemble before the crucifix Pastor George brought back for us from his pilgrimage to Taizé some twenty-five years ago. The church is bare, transformed in its austerity into Calvary; the cross is central and elevated, and as much as we may want to avert our eyes, they return time and time again to Jesus, the object of our devotion. Under this cross, readers from our own congregation become characters in the painful story of things gone terribly wrong, that first Good Friday. We want to save him, we think to ourselves, but are, at once, like the first disciples, immobilized by fear and horror.

The reproaches, jolting us forward into our own time and place, challenge the integrity of our present-day discipleship, measuring it against Jesus' call to love our neighbour, welcome the stranger, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, provide shelter to those who are homeless, free the captives, love our enemies, be people for others. Recognizing the depth of Jesus' call to discipleship and the shallowness of our response, we disperse quietly, praying God's mercy for our broken world, to visit again in prayer and meditation the radical claim of our baptism into Christ, and to watch and pray for Love's redemption of this dark day.

Because we know the script, we do not return on Easter morning with doubts and fears, but more with hunger for the good news we can never hear too often; that Christ is risen, that God's love is steadfast, sure, and strong. There is no evil that is so great that it will escape Love's embrace; not even death is beyond the grace and mercy of God! And in that sign of Christ's rising again, the community of his disciples is not only *redeemed* from our burden of guilt, but now *charged* with living the risen life Christ himself has proclaimed for us and for the whole of humanity. With the energy and momentum of Christ's resurrection, we begin again to do better and to do more in bringing justice to our world; in confronting the darkness of humanity, not to condemn it, but to heal it; in working, now, without the limitations of fear that claimed us formerly, that immobilized us and curbed our intervention for the sake of another's rescue and wellbeing.

When our confirmation class met, this past Tuesday, I couldn't help myself from placing our study of the Old Testament on the back burner for a few minutes in order to have them consider Holy Week as the most sacred time of the church year. I think that for most of them/most of us, perhaps, Advent and Christmas have the greater claim. Really, it's no wonder, given how universally and how intentionally we celebrate the winter festival – with gifts for one another, with decorations, parties, traditional symbols of the season everywhere we look, special foods, special meals. There is warmth and light and joy in so much of what we say and do throughout December, and then through Christmas and New Year's, this coldest and darkest time of the year. We take time off work and school; we visit with friends and family. In many ways, we are our best selves, even making a special effort to ensure the wellbeing of those in our

community who are in need. It doesn't last, but it's a sign of hope we sorely need. The observance of Holy Week and the celebration of Easter pale by comparison.

Or do they? Well, they might if we manage to avoid their power to form us, to take us to ground, as it were, to speak deeply to us of Love's power; to allow the final leg of the journey of Lent to clothe with real-time human struggle all of the parables and teaching and healing and preaching we have received from Jesus. I mean, life can be quite pleasant if all we do is come to church Sunday after Sunday, week after week, and listen to the good news. Walking the "talk" is a walk that actually demands something of us; and the "walk" we took this morning is more than a ritual, it's an invitation for us to think about the "journey" of Lent and the "journey" of Holy Week as more than metaphors. When we rise from our seats and leave the Sanctuary this morning, we can leave the journey metaphor behind, because the real journey begins as soon as we take a step, as soon as we greet our neighbour, as soon as we exit the doors of the church and move onto our next destination. Perhaps we'll have palm leaves or palm crosses in our hands to remind us that the journey has just begun; and it's the journey of our formation and re-formation as the people of God in Christ Jesus that is so closely bound to Jesus' embodiment of the gospel in the events of Holy Week, Jesus' embodiment of all that he previously said and did. We miss the point of Christianity if we think it's all about being good and feeling good. We are called to walk with Jesus, to suffer with Jesus, to be servants of one another as Jesus was our servant, to remain faithful to Jesus as only the women "who used to follow him and provide for him when he was in Galilee" remained faithful to Jesus on Good Friday. If we are ever to learn what it means to be people for others, we learn it in and through the lows and the highs, the agony and the ecstasy, the suffering and the rejoicing of this most sacred time of the church year.

And what we see in all the drama is "wondrous love". Love that goes the distance – not a *metaphor*, but rather a *challenge* to use the love we have known in Christ Jesus wherever and whenever we are. Love that transforms everyone we meet from "other" into our "neighbour"; love that transforms strangers into friends; love that *compels* us to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, provide shelter to those who are homeless, and free the captives because anything less is talk, not walk.

In Jesus Christ, his suffering, death, and resurrection, God calls us not to "love," but to "wondrous love;" love that is so thoroughly informed by Christ crucified and risen that it leaves us no peace until we *use* the vision and power that has been given to us through faith in Christ's saving work to change the world from broken to whole, from dying to living, from unjust to just, from conflicted to reconciled, from oligarchy into commonwealth. Wondrous love has that power. As the *disciples* of Jesus, do we have the conviction to claim it as our own?