

Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday – Year B – April 5, 2009
Mark 11:1-11a; Psalm 118:19-29 –
Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Mark 14:1-15:47
Susan E. Wilmot

As we have spent time together in many ways over the last ten months, quite a few of you have asked Steve and I either directly or in roundabout way whether we like it here, and if the rectory is comfortable and does it meet our needs. The answers are yes, yes, and yes. As you might expect, there is a little more behind the simple affirmations. For my part, you need to know that I love you all, and I love serving this community. This is the biggest part of my joy in fulfilling God's call on my life. Yet, there is also something else about this place that feeds and sustains me. In fact, I will go as far as to say it is a prayer answered. Paradoxically, it is present and yet not present. We can always make it, and several of us gather each Thursday morning to do just that, and yet it is made in the absence of the most common of things. I can tell you, that I noticed it the very first night we arrived on the Mountain, and I appreciate it more and more the longer I am here.

More about this paradoxical puzzler in a moment, but in the meantime, we have an amazing journey ahead of us. This is the most holy of weeks in which we enter Jerusalem with Jesus, and walk the tightrope of betrayal and denial, the fear-filled scattering of the disciples, and the fearful political maneuverings that surrounds Jesus' last days. We will have the opportunity to experience together the final act of humble service as Jesus washes the feet of His disciples at the Last Supper; and to hold the cross as Simon of Cyrene once did for our Lord on the way to Golgotha. And we will know the terrible loss and grief of Good Friday, when Jesus is crucified, dies, and is buried. What we must remember is that all this must happen before we can truly embrace and understand the exuberant joy and most importantly, the promise of the resurrection for this life, and the life to come.

For today, you and I join in welcoming all the pilgrims who have come to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. The traditional welcome is the cries of "hosanna" and the strewing of the road into Jerusalem with palm branches. However, as the Gospel of Mark describes it for us, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is a little different. Jesus comes from Bethphage and Bethany near the Mount of Olives, sending two of his disciples ahead to procure a colt that has never been ridden for His use. There are a few things to notice here already. The first is the significance of the reference to the Mount of Olives. According to the prophet Zechariah (14:4) the Messiah -- the Lord -- would appear on the Mount of Olives "on that day". Strangely, after all His walking around the regions of Galilee and Judea, Jesus sends his disciples to bring Him a colt, so that he might ride into Jerusalem. Let's just say he's not tired of walking. Jesus is making a statement or even two here. The first is the fulfillment of another prophetic utterance from Zechariah (9:9). It is a reference to the coming of the king, riding humbly on a donkey, even on a colt, the foal of a donkey. The second is a clear mockery of the imperial rule of the Roman emperor, who took for himself the title of son of god and demanded the worship of the people under Roman jurisdiction, as emperor, king, god and savior under. The custom was that the victorious emperor rode into conquered cities on his war-horse to receive the cheers and gratitude of the people, including the wreath or crown of victory. Jesus, the true king, rides into Jerusalem on a colt. He does not wear a crown yet, but will be given a crown of thorns. He rides as the true savior of the world, and to fulfill God's victory over sin and death, even though that is achieved through His humiliating death on a cross.

Beyond the political mockery is the sad irony. There are shouts of "hosanna" from those who have accompanied Jesus to Jerusalem -- those who go ahead, and those who follow -- according to Mark's account. The acclamation is from Psalm 118, which is a psalm for pilgrims going to the Temple. It is also a royal psalm, one said or sung during the enthronement procession for the king.

Hosanna is a prayer of salvation, literally meaning “save, I pray”. Hear and feel the irony. Jesus is the King of kings, and Lord of lords. Jesus is our Lord and Savior. Yet within a matter of days, those who would shout “hosanna” and offer their blessing to Jesus, will be shouting “crucify” and taunting Him to save Himself. The cries of the crowd somehow seem to smother and deafen all reasonableness throughout the travesty of Jesus’ trial before His own religious leaders, and perhaps even the opportunity to offer an answer to Pontius Pilate’s barrage of questions. The shouts are a marked contrast to what Mark tells us of Jesus as He rides into Jerusalem and stands trial. Through it all, Jesus retains His holy silence, the dignity of His Truth, and His unerring trust in God the Father. After all that Jesus has said and done in His ministry, He has come to the end of words. Jesus is beyond the distractions of a crowd’s noise, or the rude interruption of interrogative questions. He has entered the silence of that mysterious communion with God; a silence that you and I can also share, in the practice of contemplative prayer. In all of these moments of Jesus’ last days in Jerusalem, Mark implicitly proclaims that Jesus’ strength and courage to face the pain of betrayal and the agony of crucifixion comes from silently surrendering His will to God’s will in prayer.

Has anyone solved the paradoxical puzzle we began with today? It begins with love, and also feeds and sustains us? It is the beautiful, enigmatic, awe-inspiring, breathtaking, soul refreshing silence that dwells in these Mountains, and in the hearts of many in this community. It is as if the whole of creation kneels humbly before the majesty of God and like Jesus, we too discover the end of words. Silence is not just golden, it is holy. As Morton Kelsey has expressed it, “Speech is of Time, Silence is of Eternity.” Silence is about listening. Jesus is silently awaiting the fulfillment of God’s purpose for His life and death, listening only to God. What do you think we could learn about God’s desire for our lives if we entered into silent communion with God more often? What is God saying to you and me that we cannot quite hear through the clamoring distractions of our daily busy-ness? When we meet Jesus in one another, and in all of God’s children, do we shout blessings one day, and “crucify” the next?

Kathleen Norris tells the story of her favorite classroom exercise with children. She first encourages them to make as much noise as possible with their hands, feet and mouths, with the condition that at her signal they will immediately stop and make silence. She describes the experience as a revelation to the kids. While the children have little new to say about the noise they make, describing it mostly in clichés, Norris shares that the silence liberates their imaginations. Some of the children have described the experience as “me sleeping waiting to wake up”, or “a tree spreading its branches to the sun”. One little girl offered this about the silence, “Silence reminds me to take my soul with me wherever I go.” Some kids love it, and want to do it again. Some say it’s scary. When asked why, one fifth grader said, “It’s like we’re waiting for something – it’s scary.”

“Silence is the element in which great things fashion themselves together, that at length they may emerge, full-formed and majestic, into the daylight of Life, which they are to rule....” So says, writer Thomas Carlyle. One more time, “Silence is the element in which great things fashion themselves together, that at length they may emerge, full-formed and majestic, into the daylight of Life, which they are to rule....” Holy week begins today. In the holiness of prayer that is also the silence of eternity, let us ponder all that we have heard today, and all that we will experience in these, our final steps of our Lenten journey. May God liberate all our imaginations to receive, as Jesus did, God’s gift of abundant and unending Life, and to share our hope in Christ faithfully and joyfully with others.

Amen.