

“The False Dawn”
Isaiah 55:6-9; Matthew 21:1-11
April 14, 2019

I’m sure you’re all familiar with the stories about meeting St. Peter at the pearly gates. One goes like this:

A minister dies, and presents himself to Peter at the gates of the heavenly city. Administering the Final Oral Exam, Peter asks our clergy friend why he thought he should be able to gain entrance to the Righteous Kingdom. After thinking a moment or two, the clergyman started, in effect, to nervously rattle off his resume. “Well, I headed a church and social relief agency in the big city for a dozen years” he affirmed. But Peter looked in his admissions book, shook his head, and said, “Sorry, that does not ring a bell.”

His anxiety rising, our minister friend offered that he had pastored the biggest church in town, expanding the membership and filling the pews. But it seemed that would not do, either. In fact, nothing the minister could point to seemed to satisfy the entrance examination requirements. And now the clergyman was really beginning to sweat!

Slamming his book shut, Peter finally declared, “I’m afraid we just can’t let you in.” But then, an angel from God’s throne came by and whispered something in the saint’s ear. And then it dawned on Peter, who hesitated a moment before he said, “So you’re the fellow who fed the birds in the park during the afternoon?” “Why, yes” came the stammering reply from a very deflated Reverend. Then the saint opened his arms wide, warmly exclaiming: “Come right in! It seems that the Lord of the sparrows has been waiting to welcome you!”

What this little story is trying to tell us, of course, is that while we have our own agenda, heaven has its agenda as well. And, they do not always match up. It’s good to be considered a “success.” It’s fine to do all sorts of good deeds. But it isn’t always the things that appear grand and magnificent to us that God would have us be about. It isn’t

always a question of making an impression, or having influence in the corridors of power, or being able to exalt ourselves in our work. No - sometimes God's agenda, God's priorities, are very, very different from our own, as Isaiah reminds us in our Old Testament lesson this morning.

That, I believe, is one of the points to the entire Palm Sunday story. What the disciples saw as being of central importance, and what the crowds saw as being most important, had precious little to do with Jesus of Nazareth, who spoke of the lilies of the field, the birds of the air, and forgiving one another in love.

For while Jesus taught the crowds, saying that foxes had their dens and birds their nests - but the Son of Man had no place to lay down his head - Simon the Zealot (one of the twelve disciples) wanted to hear all about the restoration of the Kingdom to Israel, the expulsion of the hated Romans, and the triumph of Zion. While Christ taught his followers to pray, "THY will be done," Peter, John, and James were vying with each other for positions in the Kingdom: who, indeed, would gain the position of honor, at the right hand of Christ the King?

Did they ever imagine that such an exalted status would belong to a thief, hanging on a cross, at Golgotha?

And so would the Lord of the sparrows be misunderstood, yet again. For the crowds (and remember, the crowds are us), the crowds would have Palm Sunday become their day, offering to Christ the same gift which Satan offered to him during those forty days in the Lenten wilderness about which we were reminded just last week: giving Jesus the kingdom, and the power, and the glory ... at the price of denying who he was and abandoning his mission. For Palm Sunday is the day, once again, when Christ would speak of sacrifice, while the disciples had sought to rebuke him for even thinking in such terms, only to have Jesus reply, "Get thee behind me, Satan!"

For the crowds were ready to offer to Christ what the crowds wanted for themselves - if only he would submit to their wishes concerning his life's work. As we

know, Palm Sunday would prove to be their last chance to bend Christ to their will, to get him to sell out, to buy into the system, to give up his ideals ... and to stop trying to be a martyr for a cause. For martyrs only show us where we have fallen short, where we have failed to stand up for truth uncompromised, righteousness unblemished, and judgment unprejudiced. And that can make an awful lot of people uncomfortable.

I am sure most of us have heard it said that it is only because God is merciful that not all our prayers are answered in the affirmative because if we got what we prayed for, there would be an awful lot of Unintended Consequences we would have to contend with. Now, if God had granted the prayers of the disciples, that Jesus be made King of Israel, he probably would have ended up like any other king - you could eventually read about him in the history books, and maybe you'd marvel at his wisdom (like we do King Solomon's) ... but in the end Jesus would have been just another king of an insignificant country in an out-of-the-way corner of the world. He certainly wouldn't be anyone we'd end up worshipping thousands of years later. Yes, some might admire him, but 2000 years of world history would have been quite different - and impoverished - had the crowds gotten their way. And when they did NOT get their way ... there would be Hell to pay.

In any case, for the crowds the day was a glorious one. They had their parade, their fun. They had let off steam. They had shouted their slogans which had meant so much to them over the years. They waved their palm branches, which meant victory - victory over whoever it was that they hated most at the moment. It didn't matter if it was the Romans, or their collaborators the Sadducees, or tax collectors or whoever. Only so long as the crowds could chant, "We're Number One!" And so they had their day.

But what was their parade compared to the parade of women that left an empty tomb a week later, in great bewilderment and yet in joy? What was the crowd's shouting compared to the news that passed, a week later, like wildfire: "He Is Risen!" What were their palm branches and the victory they symbolized compared to the victorious cry that

has echoed throughout the ages whenever people have shared with each other the Good News of the resurrection faith, that God Is With Us.

No, Palm Sunday pales in comparison. For ultimately it is not his day. It is not God's day.

True, we shouldn't forget that Jesus was making a supreme statement as he rode into the capital city on a donkey. But somehow, for the spectators whom Jesus had come to save - for the crowds - that was virtually drowned out in their shouting. True, God was speaking through his Christ when God sent him into Jerusalem, the stronghold of his enemies, but that too seemed to be lost in the circus-like atmosphere of a joyous mob on the verge of going wild.

It is as if Palm Sunday is the false dawn. No doubt you have heard of that phenomenon. I do not know how to explain it from a scientific point of view, but somehow, an hour or so before the real dawn, before the true glory comes, you can almost imagine some stray beams of light momentarily, fleetingly and faintly brightening up part of the night sky. But soon our world returns to darkness, the false dawn having disappointed us, deceived us - denying our expectations, letting us down ... until the true dawn, in all its glory, comes to vanquish the darkness in the rising of the sun.

This Holy Week, as we celebrate Palm Sunday, let us remember that the true kingdom, power, and glory are not ours, not of our making, not of this world, not from our agenda. For these will ultimately be judged as inadequate to the task of our salvation. Rather, true glory will belong to us only because we have been graced with glory from another world, another reality, another kingdom.

Let us pray: