

Finding The Silver Linings

Sunday of the Passion, April 5, 2020

The crowd was cheering, waving palm fronds in the air, shouting "Blessed is he who comes in the Lord" and "Hosanna!" (which means "Save us!"). All elements of ancient Jewish ritual that they knew by heart.

The palm fronds were a symbol of Israel's **victory** over the nations that opposed them — both their **physical** victory over them in combat; and their **moral** victory over them when God comes to judge the earth on the Day of Atonement. The rabbis explained the symbol of the palms like this:

"Compare it to two men who went before a judge. For a time, we cannot know the outcome . . . [but] whoever emerges carrying palm fronds in his hands signals that he is the victor. So it is with Israel and the nations as they pass before the Lord for judgement on the Day of Atonement: For a time, we do not know who is victorious. [So,] God told them to take palm fronds in their hands, so that all can know they were victorious." (Midrash Tanhuma Emor 18)

So, as Jesus entered Jerusalem, the crowd's holding of palm fronds, & spreading them out on the road before him, was **a proclamation to all** — that they would be victorious over their enemies (who, at the moment, were the Romans.)

But not just the palms were significant. The crowd was shouting particular phrases of Scripture from Psalm 118 that were also part of the ritual. As I said, the cry, "Hosanna!" (in Hebrew) means "Save us!" But save us **from what?** And save us **how?**

The verses of the Psalm that we didn't hear read today — help us put that "Hosanna!" into context. The other verses read:

- The Lord is on my side to help me; I shall look in triumph on those who hate me.
- All nations surrounded me; [but] in the name of the Lord, I cut them off!
- They surrounded me on every side; [but] in the name of the Lord, I cut them off!
- They surrounded me like bees; they blazed like a fire of thorns; [but] in the name of the Lord, I cut them off!
- There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous....
- Hosanna! (Save us!) we beseech you, O Lord! Make us now to prosper!

(Psalm 118: 7, 10, 11, 12, 15, 25; see also the 'Hosanna' in 1 Chronicles 16:35, when the Ark of the Covenant enters Jerusalem.)

So, in context, "Hosanna!" was Israel's cry for God to save them from their enemies (from the other nations they were in conflict with) — by giving Israel victory over them in battle. The psalm, as a whole, is very clearly *a song of victory ... over enemies.*

The other phrase from Psalm 118 that the crowd shouted as Jesus entered Jerusalem, was **"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord"** (v. 26.) And, again, we have to understand this particular phrase in the context of the whole psalm. *"The one who comes in the name of the Lord"* is the long awaited Messiah, the great leader who will come to save Israel in their darkest hour by conquering the nations that oppose them. Just as — in the past — God, through Moses, had saved them from the Egyptians... God, through the Messiah, would save them in the future. This recollection of the past and proclamation of future hope are at the heart of Passover.

So with their palm fronds, their hosannas, and their shouting "Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord!" the crowd was proclaiming & celebrating that their "lot" would be Victory, Honour & Glory (and that the "lot" of their enemies would be Defeat, Shame & Contempt.) So emotions were high, to say the least. This is where the crowd was "at".

But where was Jesus "at" in all of this?

Before he entered Jerusalem — on his journey there with the disciples — three critical things happened that shed light on how he viewed the popular obsession with victory, honour, and glory.

First, Jesus tells the disciples that he is knowingly, purposely — of his own free will — going down into the darkness of Jerusalem, where he will experience profound defeat, dishonour, contempt, pain, and will lose his life (Mark 8:31-33). And Peter (the loud "mouthpiece" of the 12) essentially tells Jesus that he is *"not in his right mind."* It's obvious to all of them that a **"normal"** person always seeks victory, honour & glory, and always avoids defeat, dishonour & death (at all costs.) They were sincerely concerned for Jesus' wellbeing. But — although sincere — Jesus sees their concerns as false & harmful. He tells Peter that — in persuading him to not go down into the darkness of Jerusalem — Peter is **not** being kind & considerate at all, but is actually being a "stumbling block," a Tempter, encouraging Jesus to fall from Union with the Father. He explains to Peter that the **reason** he is acting in this harmful way is because his mind is "set" on misguided human concerns (about victory & defeat, honour & shame, glory & infamy.) So that Peter cannot perceive what the **real** concerns — the **divine** concerns — in this situation actually are.

Then, **a second time**, Jesus tells the disciples about the great defeat, dishonour, suffering & death he is about to face in Jerusalem (Mark 9:30-37.) This time, Peter "shuts up" along with rest of them. The text says that they didn't understand what he was talking about, but were afraid to ask. Right after that, however, the 12 get into an argument with one another about "who among them was the greatest." So Jesus sits them down & explains that "Whoever wants to be the **first** of all, must be **last** of all, and the **servant** of all." Then he welcomes over a little child into their "Big, Important" inner circle, takes the little child into his arms and tells his disciples, *"Whoever welcomes such a child in my name welcomes me."*

And finally — **a third time**, just before they arrive in Jerusalem, Jesus tells them again of the great darkness that he will (knowingly, intentionally) be entering there. This time he goes into more detail (about the condemning, the mocking, the spitting, the whipping, that will precede his murder.) And, **again** (perhaps because they're so thoroughly confused & so "numb" from their unresolved fears & grief), the disciples make no response to what he is saying.

But they're still very clear about some things. The two brothers — James & John — come and tell him that they want him to give them "the two best seats" when he gains his glory (*the one at his right hand & the one at his left.*) And, as we'd expect, this leads to an argument with the other ten disciples (*each of whom likely felt the most deserving of this high honour.*) So Jesus gives them one last talk. This time he speaks of how the rulers of this world *"lord it over"* their people like tyrants. Jesus reminds them that "that's how it works" in *"the world'."* *"But not in our world; not for me; and not for you. Whoever wishes to become great among you... must be a servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you... must be the slave of all. For I came to serve, not to be served, and to give my life, so that many may live"* (see Mark 10:32-45.)

So when he passes through the gates of Jerusalem on his little donkey, and the crowds are ecstatically waving their palms & chanting about the awesome Victory, Honour & Glory that will be theirs ... **Jesus is silent.** Because he **knows** something that the crowd & his disciples still do not.

He **knows** that he is loved — in victory & in defeat; in honour & in dishonour; in glory & in ill repute; in health & in sickness; in gain & in loss; in pleasure & in pain; in life & in death. He is not under the tragic **illusion** that if God really loved him, he would only have experiences of victory, honour, gain & glory. Or the illusion that God does **not** love him when he experiences defeat & loss.

He **knows** that it is "tragic illusions" like these that make what he calls *"the world"* go 'round. Remember that what Jesus calls *"the world"* is not the planet earth or the human race. It is only the tragic dimension of the human world. It's only the tragic & highly contagious **"game"** — in which

the Glorious, Honourable Victors strive to put the Despised Losers to Shame — until the "Losers" finally gain power, and then, do the same to the former Victors. And on & on it goes, as it has from the beginning of time. It's the tragic game that the 12 disciples were still playing on their journey with Jesus down to Jerusalem. It's the game that still assimilates our cultures, politics, religions, and our personal lives into itself, creating a *"false world"* — bent on victory & terrified of defeat.

Jesus enters Jerusalem not to be "puffed up" by that false world, but to deflate it — to expose its illusions — by revealing the presence of divine love in the midst of the defeat, dishonour, and contempt he will experience — as those who *"know not what they are doing"* make him their **scapegoat** — imagining that his **defeat** would become their victory; his **loss** would become their gain; his **disgrace** would bring them more honour; his being **hated** would increase their being loved. For that's *"how the world works"*... when we're caught up in tragic illusions... and don't actually know what we're doing.

In our own lives, we know from experience that the sun rises on **both** those who harm, and those who help. The rain falls on **both** those who do good, and those who do evil. We **all** experience it **all** — *victories & defeats; honour & dishonour; praise & blame; pleasure & pain; times of glory & times when nobody knows our name.* And in knowing this... we begin to see the wisdom of the cross. In our wisest moments, we understand that we really **don't** have the power to have only *"light"* experiences in our lives; inevitably, we have *"dark"* ones as well; and so does everyone else. In our wisest moments, we recognize that **whatever** we're experiencing in a given moment — cannot separate us from the love of God in Christ. And within that love, we come to trust & to know that "all things" will work together for good. We come to see the "silver linings" of spiritual growth in the darkest of clouds. In our wisest moments, we even become more politically astute. We come to recognize that only a tragic illusion — only a "pretence" of power — can make a person's life seem always & only *"fortunate"* — like the life of Caesar. We come to see through the pretence, and realize that persons can become so **extremely** "fortunate" only by making others **less** fortunate.

Jesus sees all of these things (and more) as he enters the darkness of Jerusalem. But his disciples do not. He'd explained it all to them over the past three years through many conversations, teachings, parables, instructions, and through multiple "live" examples as they watched him live & work. On the way to Jerusalem, he pushes the point home even harder and more explicitly. But they just can't "get it."

Why was it so crystal clear to Jesus, and so very obscure to his disciples? The common, easy answer is *"Because he was God, and they were not"* or *"Because he was wise, and they were foolish."* But these are actually more "cop-outs" than answers. They just put distance between us and Jesus, and suggest that there's nothing we can do to develop a mind — an understanding, a perspective — like his.

But Jesus wasn't **born** that way! He **did** something - something practical - to gain the perspective that he had when he walked through the gates of Jerusalem. It's something he did all the time, whether his experiences were full of "light" or full of "darkness." It's something the church was only able to figure out after the resurrection. St. Paul described it in our second reading from Philippians. Jesus regularly, consciously, actively **"emptied himself"** of all the false pretensions to power that were constantly flowing into his mind from what he called *"the world."* The messages that told him over & over again: *"If only you were highly esteemed — if only you would do whatever it takes to be victorious & honourable & glorious in the eyes of others..... everyone would love you. You would never lose, never be disgraced, never be forgotten. You'd have everything under control. You'd be... in Paradise."*

Did such *"vainglorious"* thoughts really go through the holy mind of Jesus??? Most surely they did. If they didn't, he wouldn't have experienced temptations. But he **learned**, through his many trying experiences, that these seductive messages never helped him, but only did him harm.

So he **learned** how to not "*harbour*" them and "*ruminare*" on them within his mind — by continually exposing their false promises, and "emptying himself" of them, whenever they arose.

He wasn't swayed by the waving palms, or the shouts of "Hosanna!", or the threats of the religious & political authorities, **because he was "empty."** Because he was **practiced** at "emptying himself" of the mental toxins that would have "resonated" with false praise, and with appeals for him to *run* from being dishonoured. So he was **free** to simply "follow the lead" of the One he called Father.

At some level, we are **all** being persuaded to keep silently repeating that tragic "mantra" that tells us: "*Life is all about gaining, not losing — being honoured, not put to shame; — being praised, not blamed — always being healthy, never sick*", and so on. And when our minds come to believe it, we imagine that this is what happiness is all about. Even though this is not at all what it means to be human. So how do we get free of these harmful illusions that get poured into our minds by what Jesus called "the world"?

St. Paul's counsel (in our reading from Philippians), is that we let this **same mind** be in **us** that was in Christ Jesus — who didn't see being equal to God as something to be grasped — but emptied himself of all such pretensions, became a humble servant, and followed God even to the point of death on a cross. In this way he experienced a holy victory **in the midst** of defeat, a holy honour **in the midst** of shame, and a holy glory **in the midst** of being despised — which turned the tragic world upside down.

But how does that work in **our** lives? How can **we** "empty ourselves" of the tragic illusions that promise us everything — *but actually lead us further away* — from knowing the love of God in our lives?

"Emptying ourselves" of harmful illusions about ourselves, others, and God is the basic meditation at the heart of Christian life. It is a meditation in an "informal" sense. It doesn't require sitting on the floor & crossing your legs & following a certain technique for an hour.

It only requires becoming **aware** in the midst of our everyday life experiences — when we're **striving** to be well-esteemed in the eyes of others — when we're **striving** to say & do the things that make us seem worthy of praise — when we're striving to **not** say or do the things that make us seem worthy of blame. When we catch that kind of striving happening within us — we know that, in that moment, we are operating "*under the influence*" of an illusion... an illusion about what life & love, goodness & happiness really are.. and how we can "**make**" them happen in our lives.

We all do it, in one way or another.

The key is — *when we become aware that we're doing it — to pause...* and remember Christ. To pause & remember that **however** we are esteemed in the eyes of men (or of women) says absolutely **nothing** about who we are, or how we are loved. This opens us up for the love of God to be poured into our hearts & minds by the Holy Spirit. It makes our **striving** to be well-esteemed "lose its steam", and enables us to "let go" of our harmful illusions about our lives, to "**empty ourselves**" of all but the love of Christ, for us and for all those we are fortunate to meet each day.

Thanks be to God.