

Palm Sunday & the Passion of the Lord: Holy Trinity Church: April 9, 2017

Matthew 26: 14- 27:66: *Humility Is The Key To Greatness*

Preached

By

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ, have you noticed that life is full of humbling experiences? A humbler human being never lived than Jesus of Nazareth. That is the essence of the Good News for this Palm Sunday. No greater human being ever lived than Jesus of Nazareth. He was the very Word of God come down from God. He was Life. He was Light. He was Truth. He was the Way. And yet no one ever emptied himself more completely of pride and arrogance than Jesus the Christ.

Consider the donkey on which Jesus rode into Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday. Let's face it, even your rector chose a very handsome stallion on which to ride to church one Sunday morning 6 years ago, of happy memory. Certainly that humble little donkey Jesus rode was no symbol of pride,

prestige or wealth. Jesus' entrance into the Holy City was consistent with everything he lived and taught. Remember how offended Simon Peter was when Jesus sought to wash his feet? That was a job for a servant, not for a distinguished rabbi. The idea that greatness is related to servanthood was a principle that Jesus' disciples had a difficult time grasping.

The washing of the disciples' feet took place at the Last Supper. Luke tells us that on the way to that sacred meal the disciples had been arguing over which of them would be the greatest in the Kingdom of God. The disciples thought of greatness in terms of worldly success. To achieve success was to have others serve you. They were not prepared to handle Jesus' teaching that "whoever wants to be first must be the servant of all. For even the Son of God did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10: 44-45) That was a radical teaching for them, and it is a radical teaching for many of us. Yet there is an important truth here for our lives.

Palm Sunday is the beginning of Holy Week. It is interesting to watch the strong Son of God acknowledge his dependence on God during those final hours. In the garden he prays, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me . . ." On the cross, at the height of his despair, he cries out, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" You and I have prayed that prayer even when we knew that

God has not forsaken us. “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit!” he prayed at the end.

My brothers and sisters, if Jesus found it necessary to utterly and completely depend on God, how can you and I live our lives without depending on God as well? It is very difficult for many of us to see beyond our own needs and our own circumstances. It is so essential this morning that we see that humble Galilean riding into Jerusalem on that donkey. In the Nicene Creed we affirm that Jesus is “God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God.” Yet here he was humbling himself to be sacrificed like a criminal on the cross of Calvary. No crown, no throne, no comfortable palace, he gave it all up for you and me. This has always endeared Jesus to the poor, the homeless, the immigrant, the sad and depressed, the marginalized people, all the people society declares to be the lepers of the world at the very bottom of society.

John W. Gardner, in his book, *Excellence*, includes a letter by Sarah Gooder, a young girl working in the coal mines of England in 1842. Here is what Sarah wrote: “I am Sarah Gooder, I am eight years old. I’m a coal carrier in the Gawber Mine. It does not tire me but I have to [work] without a light and I’m scared. I go at four and sometimes half past three in the morning, and come out at five and half past in the evening. I never go to sleep. Sometimes I sing

when I've light, but not in the dark; I dare not sing then. I don't like being in the [coal] pit. I am very sleepy when I go in the morning. I go to Sunday school and learn to read. They teach me to pray. I have heard tell of Jesus many a time. I don't know why he came on earth. I don't know why he died, but he had stones for his head to rest on."

My dear sisters and brothers, that is how people in civilized England and in America lived around the time of our Civil War, an eight year old girl working 14 hours a day in coal mines. Did you notice what impressed Sarah Gooder about Jesus, though? "He had stones for his head to rest on." No soft pillow in a luxurious mansion for him. He cared enough to come down where Sarah was! It begs the question and our challenge this Palm Sunday week end: Do we have that much greatness within us to see the needs of the least and the lowly? Or are we one of these petty, little people who can see only his or her own needs?

If you remember one thing from this sermon remember this, humility is the key to greatness. That is an important thing for us to see. Servanthood is the path to true success. Some of the greatest people who ever lived have viewed themselves as servants, and they have blessed our world.

There was an article in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* sometime back about a 14-year old Jewish girl at the end of World War II who was discovered lost, alone, and barely alive lying on the platform of an abandoned railroad station. It was the day the Russian army liberated the Nazi labor camp where she was held captive. Though she was free, she was half-starved and too exhausted to pick herself up off the ground. She thought she would die there. But then a young priest came beside her. He offered her tea, two slices of bread, and some cheese. “Where do you want to go?” he asked her. “Krakow,” she managed to reply. “I’m going there too,” he said. “Let me help you up.” He tried to lift Edith to her feet but she collapsed. So he picked her up and literally carried her two miles to the train going to Krakow. “What is your name?” he asked. “Edith Zirer,” she replied. “My name is Karol,” replied her rescuer. When they arrived at Krakow, they were separated and they never saw each other again, until the year 2000. In Jerusalem, at the Holocaust memorial, Edith Zirer, with tears in her eyes, clasped the hands of a Polish priest named Karol, whom the world grew to know as Pope John Paul II. The Pope had performed that quiet act of service of lifting up and carrying this poor Holocaust survivor and had forgotten it. But Edith never forgot it. Before the whole world she declared, “He came like an angel out of nowhere and gave me life. He saved me. There’s no other word for it. It’s thanks to him

I'm here today.” Then Edith Zierer quoted a verse from the Talmud which says, “To save one life is to save the world.” Sometimes when we think of the pope and we associate him with the pomp and circumstance of his lofty office. We forget that many of the modern popes, including this humble servant we have now, have had the heart of a servant. I see such greatness in Pope Francis because he is so humble.

All greatness grows out of humility and service. After all, Jesus came into Jerusalem riding on a donkey. There is a beautiful story about the British author Graham Greene. Greene once waited two and a half years for a 15-minute appointment with the Roman Catholic mystic Padre Pio, who resided in an Italian monastery. Padre Pio was reputed to be “a living saint” and bore on his body the “stigmata” or the 7 wounds of Christ. On the day Greene was due to meet with this revered mystic, he first attended a mass where Padre Pio officiated. Their appointment was to begin immediately after the mass. However, when the mass was over, instead of keeping this much awaited appointment, Greene left the church, headed for the airport and flew directly back to London. When asked why he broke the appointment he had waited on for two and a half years, Greene said, “I was not ready for the manner in which that man could change my life.”

My dearest sisters and brothers, may I suggest that this is where many of us are: “I was not ready for the manner in which that man could change my life.” We know we lack the love. We know we lack compassion. We know we lack the humble caring that Christ embodied. Yet, we are thankful for the grace that covers this and all our sins, but we are not certain if we want to take our faith that far. We think to ourselves: “I am not ready for the manner in which that man could change my life.” I pray that you are ready. I pray that, deep in your heart, you want to be more like Jesus committed to service so that together Holy Trinity Church might make this world a better place. Do you have that much greatness within you to see the needs of the least and the lowly? I say yes. Why, because I see greatness in each and every one of you. AMEN.