

Palm Sunday, Sunday of the Passion: Holy Trinity Church: March 28, 2021

Mark 11:1-11: *Eight Days to Eternity*

Preached

By

The Rev. John E. Higginbotham

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

Palm Sunday is the celebration of that momentous day when crowds of people welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem and the crowds sang, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” They welcomed Jesus as their potential liberator from the oppression of Rome. They expected a ‘Royal Messiah,’ a Warrior Messiah who would conquer the Romans and throw them off their sacred land. They did not know that he came as their Savior from sin and death. Even more importantly, Palm Sunday helps prepare us for Holy Week, the last week in Jesus’ earthly ministry, culminating in his horrific crucifixion on Good Friday and his resurrection on Easter Sunday.

Palm Sunday is the beginning of the most important eight days on the Christian calendar. Christ is welcomed into Jerusalem. But the crowds begin

to turn against him. He has his Last Supper with his disciples, which we will celebrate Thursday evening. The week closes with his body broken on the cross of Calvary and his disciples fleeing in disbelief, only to have their world turned upside down when he begins appearing to them in his new resurrected body. What a magnificent drama in these last eight days! No wonder millions of people over the ages have had their lives transformed by its power. A magnificent message is encapsulated in a very short period. It is the message of salvation. John explained it like this in the prologue to his Gospel: *“He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God”* (John 1:11-12). Eight days to eternity. What does it all mean? More importantly, what does it mean in our lives, you and me? Let me suggest three important themes that emerge from these eight days.

First, we see Christ’s courage in the face of unbelievable cruelty. He knew it didn’t matter how many palms branches they threw at his feet that first Palm Sunday, the crowd would turn against him. His head was not turned by all those, “hosannas” or the garments laid out on the road. He knew what lay ahead. He knew he had been sent with a purpose. In the same way, our faith teaches us, humanity was held hostage by sin and death. Christ was sent to infiltrate our world and our hearts to set us free. He was sent to break the

yoke of sin that kept us from being what God created us to be. He knew it would not be easy. He was painfully familiar with the messianic prophecy of Isaiah, *“The Sovereign Lord has opened my ears, and I have not been rebellious; I have not drawn back. I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting. Because the Sovereign Lord helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore, have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame”* (50:5-7). Jesus knew salvation could not come without suffering. Nothing worthwhile ever does, and this was the most important endeavor ever undertaken by a human being. In the garden of Gethsemane, he prayed, *“My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will”* (Matthew 26:39). There are many Christians who are uncomfortable focusing on the cross, yet the cross of Jesus Christ is at the very heart of our faith.

Theologian and author, Fr. Henri Nouwen, tells a disturbing story about a family he knew in Paraguay. The father, a doctor, was active in protests the military. He spoke out repeatedly against its human rights abuses. Local police took their revenge by arresting his teenage son and torturing him until he was dead. It was a horrible crime. Townsfolk wanted to turn the funeral into a huge protest march. But the doctor chose another means of protest. The

father displayed his son's body in the local church. However, he was not dressed in a fine suit. And the funeral director applied no make-up. The father displayed his son as he had found him in the jail. The son was naked, his body marked with scars from the electric shocks and cigarette burns and beatings. His son did not lie in a coffin but on the blood-soaked mattress from the jail. It was the strongest protest imaginable, for it put injustice on grotesque display.

My sisters and brothers see Jesus our savior, the Christ hanging on the cross. He hangs there naked. In reverence of Christ, paintings show him with a loin cloth, but that was not the practice for crucifixion. The condemned man hung there naked. The execution was always carried out publicly, which enhanced the humiliation for those so punished and sent a clear message to those who looked upon those on the cross. In those barbaric times, crucifixion was regarded as the worst form of execution, reserved for the worst of criminals. It was utterly cruel and demeaning. So terrible was it that it was used only on the lowest classes of society and for the most heinous crimes such as treason. Roman crucifixion generally followed flogging, which could itself kill. Generally, the victim carried the crossbeam to the place of execution. There the person was either nailed or lashed to the crossbeam. Nailing was not universal; people could be lashed to the cross by their hands and feet, which

extended the period of their slow death, partly caused by thirst, dehydration and hunger. Jesus, of course, was nailed to the cross, both his hands and his feet. It was certainly not death that Christ dreaded as he knelt in the garden and prayed that the cup might pass from him, but the pain, the suffering.

Those of you who have had a loved one who has suffered mightily know that death can come as a sweet relief. Jesus the Christ, who had emptied himself completely and became as we are, chose to experience the full depths of human suffering that he might deliver us from death and despair. We see, first, Christ's courage as he faced incredible cruelty and suffering.

But there is a second theme in this magnificent drama. It is God's love poured out in the death of His Son. (John 3:16) "*For God so loved the world that He gave His own Son . . .*" God watches as Christ hangs on the cross. God's heart breaks. The noted Holocaust survivor and Jewish author, Eli Wiesel, in his book, *Night*, says therefore he could never be a Christian. He could not believe that God would stand by while His own Son was sacrificed. It is unimaginable, unless you understand that it was necessary to show how much God cares and love for you and me.

Tom is a friend of mine. He told me when he experienced what God surely experienced that day on Calvary. Tom's nine-year-old daughter, Jennifer was

looking forward to their family's vacation. But she became ill, and a long-anticipated day at Sea World was replaced by an all-night series of CT scans, X-rays, and blood work at the hospital. As morning approached, the doctors told this exhausted little girl that she would need to have one more test, a spinal tap. The procedure would be painful, they said. The doctor then asked Tom if he planned to stay in the room. He nodded, knowing he couldn't leave Jennifer alone during the ordeal. The doctors gently asked Jennifer to remove all her clothing. She looked at her father with childlike modesty as if to ask if that were all right. They had her curl into a tiny ball, so the doctor could insert the needle through the inter-vertebral space of the spine. Tom said, he buried his face in hers and hugged her. When the needle went in, Jennifer cried. As the searing pain increased, she sobbingly repeated, "Daddy, Daddy, Daddy," her voice becoming more earnest with each word. It was as if she were saying, "Oh Daddy, please, can't you do something?" Tom's tears mingled with her tears. His heart was broken. He felt nauseated. Because he loved her, he was allowing her to go through the most agonizing experience of her life, and he could hardly stand it. In the middle of that spinal tap, his thoughts went to the cross of Christ. What unspeakable pain both the Son and the Father went through, said Tom. And it's true. We see the Jesus great courage. And we see the God's amazing love poured out.

Here is the third and the most astounding thing of all: It was all for us. We didn't deserve it, but Christ died for us.

In J. K. Rowling's series of the Harry Potter books, the evil Voldemort makes repeated attempts to capture and kill Harry Potter, but each time he fails. At last Harry asks the wise Headmaster of his school, Dumbledore, why Voldemort could not kill him. This is what Dumbledore tells him: "Your mother died to save you. If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He didn't realize that love as powerful as your mothers for you leaves its own mark. To have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever. It is in your very skin, Harry Potter. Voldemort could not touch you for this reason. It was agony for him to touch a person marked by something so good."

The reason Harry could not be killed was his mother's sacrificial love for him. The reason you and I can be victorious over sin and death is Christ's sacrificial love for us. That's the reason Palm Sunday is so important to us. That is the reason Holy Week is so important to us. It is not a scar on our forehead but the cross on our altar that tells us that someone died in our behalf. We are the recipients of an everlasting love.

The cross of Christ speaks of amazing love, sacrifice and hope in the presence of evil. Eight days to eternity Christ's courage sustains him in the face of barbaric cruelty, God's heart breaks, but His love comes shining through, and it was all for us. We have been bought with a price. "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" AMEN!