

Sermon for 28 March 2010 - Palm Sunday C - St. Francis

How did it happen so quickly? Just minutes ago we processed triumphantly with the King of kings as he entered Jerusalem riding on an unbroken colt. There we followed unquestioningly, celebrating the great deeds of power we had seen through Jesus' hands and commands. We waved our palm branches and shouted Hosanna with the multitudes who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem. And now we sit in stunned silence: dry mouthed and teary eyed as we watched that same King of kings crucified in our midst. Did we secretly believe as the first criminal taunted, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" Truth be told we do not want to hear or see Jesus' shocking answer of offering his spirit to God as he dies on a cross.

Ten chapters earlier Luke warned us, "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem." Jesus had told his followers over and over again that going to Jerusalem would mean his being mocked, tried, beaten, and killed. But as Luke maintains: "They did not grasp what was said." Two thousand years later, do we? Precious few of Jesus' followers today will follow the path from Palm Sunday to Good Friday before reaching for next Sunday. We want to talk about the triumphal events, not the hard way of the cross. We want to stay where we lack for nothing as the 70 learned when they went out without purse or sandals and we want to believe that God will shelter us from the ways of this world. Jesus reminds us that God's ways are not always the "easy" ways. And even as Jesus prays for the cup to be removed he ends with the acknowledgement, "Yet, not my will but yours be done." Even the best of prayers will not change the trajectory Jesus is now on. Still, and this is most important, even when Jesus understands that "No" is the answer to his prayer for the cup to be removed the angel comes to strengthen Jesus for the path that lies ahead. And clearly strengthened for that unimaginable journey Jesus is. That resolute gaze once fixed on arriving in Jerusalem is now fixed on enduring through the trials ahead with uncanny calmness in the midst of humanity's storm.

A crowd descends upon his prayer watch, Judas steps forward with his kiss of betrayal, and clear eyed Jesus unflinchingly names the act for what it is. Jesus firmly ends the response of sword strikes with of his own response of healing. Jesus meets anxiety driven religious leaders desperate to show their power by physical acts of violence with a calm and steady gaze. No wonder the men beating him chose to blindfold him -- they had to avoid that unflinching gaze. Both Pilate and Herod start out eager to avoid joining with this farce of a trial but become more and more anxious in the face of Jesus' silent resolve. Instead of hurling words of abuse in response to the insults and indignities thrust upon him, Jesus speaks words of comfort and forgiveness as his arms of love are stretched upon the hard wood of the cross. In the midst of one of the most dreadful acts one human can commit upon another, Jesus prays, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." Then sure of God's presence with him in the midst of the pain and suffering, Jesus' delivers himself into God's hands. Can we run away now as so many did trying to erase the memory of what Jesus willing did? Do we "beat our breasts" long enough to return home then block that image with TV, video games and a comfortable shelter from the storm? Do we surround ourselves with synthetic beauty and distractions to blot out the reality of the ugliness that led to the taking of God's son's life?

This past November, as Mark and I set our sights to journey to Jerusalem, we began our cruise in Venice, that Italian city made by hundreds of islands connected by bridges and water taxis. While there we toured one of the glass factories of Murano, a prominent island in the Venetian conglomerate. As I marveled at the beauty of gilded images all around and gazed upon the hundreds of blown glass creations forged in the unspeakable heat of molten glass and ovens, I asked the owner of the company about this city, his native city that boasted so many churches and images of art made to represent the glory of human achievement. I remain stunned by his answer. He swept his hand around the street on which his shop stood and declared, “Madame I cannot afford to live in this city. The people who made this city -- the old woman whose small store sells bread, the man who began learning the art of glass blowing at the age of 9, all of us cannot afford to live in this city. Madame, Venice has become a museum.”

His words would haunt me as I stood in line to enter the great cathedral, St. Mark’s, only to learn that to venture anywhere beyond the pews in the nave would involve payments of multiple Euros. His words would haunt me as I tried to enter other churches only to be met with a teller demanding money or a ticket to step onto those once hallowed floors. Not only the city of Venice but also the church had become a museum in this once great city of Europe. Still in the midst of the capitalistic responses as I knelt and lit candles at altars in honor and thanksgiving for each of you at St. Francis, I felt the stones laid centuries ago in faith and promise call out to me just as Jesus had warned the Pharisees as he entered Jerusalem to give his life for us. Do not doubt: God is here. Jesus’ path is still here. In the midst of the ugliness that powers and principalities can do, Jesus still calls: Follow me. Take up the cross. Walk with me and I will give you strength.

So let us not now or ever allow our faith to become a museum. Let us live our faith out loud. Let us remember that Jesus showed us how to live in community, to love one another and to offer our lives for the sake of others. Let us walk with Jesus this week. Let us give ourselves to this way of the cross and let us always remember that Jesus is right there beside us as we live our faith out loud.

