

Sermon, April 2, 2023, (Palm Sunday)

Luke 19: 29-40

“ Entry into Jerusalem”

The artist, Michelangelo, died a very wealthy man, but he did not leave an official will. But he did make a very terse statement towards the end of his life, saying, “I commit my soul into the hands of God, my body to the earth, and my possessions to my nearest relatives, enjoining them when their hour comes to meditate on the sufferings of Christ.” It was also reported that in his final hours on his deathbed that friends gathered round and read him passages from the Bible concerning the passion of Jesus Christ.

In the final years of his life, he did a series of drawings depicting the crucified Lord. Being in his late 80s his hands would shake, giving the figures a kind of shimmering quality. But, more importantly, they give us a sense of how intimately he was feeling his connection to the sufferings of Christ Jesus. This is also apparent in the very last sculpture he carved - a marble ‘Pieta’ in which the Pharisee, Nicodemus, is holding the dead body of Jesus in his arms. . Of particular interest is the fact that Michelangelo’s own face appears to have been carved on the figure of Nicodemus. Michelangelo himself is cradling the sacrificial lamb in his arms.

This raises for me the question of how deeply we find ourselves meditating on the passion of Christ, particularly in this very Holy Week of the year. Do we see the events of this week as simply a matter of routine, or do the stories touch us in the way they should? How does the passion of Christ touch us in heart, mind, and soul. How, after two thousand years, do the stories impact the ways in which we live our lives?

The week begins with Jesus triumphal entry into Jerusalem, with people placing their cloaks and branches in his path, crying out “Hosanna!”, as he rides into the city on the colt of a donkey. Most unusual! Generally, victorious leaders would ride into the city on a gallant steed, with trumpets sounding his arrival. But Jesus coming to the people on a donkey with little fanfare points to the fact that he is a different kind of leader - one whose leadership is grounded in humility. And let us not lose sight of the fact that many of those shouting hosanna, will in just a few days be calling out, “ Crucify him!” Perhaps a sign of how easily we can change our perspective by shifts in circumstance, as well as the experience of anxiety and fear.

His entry is quickly followed by his going to the temple and throwing over the tables of those who were selling things, as well as those of the money changers, according to Mark and Matthew. In a sense, what they were doing was necessary, the temple was huge, and much money was needed for its support. Not much different than the offerings we give here. And the money changers had an important function because Jerusalem was an important hub along

trade routes, and currencies needed to be made. But, perhaps, these sellers and money changers were making some shady deals, cheating the people for their own enrichment. Or, perhaps just felt that such activities disrupted the sacredness of the place. However, whatever his reasons may have been, it was probably that action that broke the camel's back, leading the authorities to begin plotting his death.

Next, we find Jesus and the disciples celebrating a Passover meal together - the last supper they will share. (I'll come back to that). Jesus then proceeds to the Garden of Gethsemane, where he faces the reality of what is soon to come, asking the Father to take the cup away from him, but then acquiescing, saying, " Thy will be done". We are given a hint as to the fear he had by the fact that he perspired both sweat and blood - an actual physical phenomenon brought on by extreme stress and fear.

Soon after he is arrested, brought to trial before Pontus Pilate and Herod Antipas, tortured, and finally brutally executed. From all of this we know that Jesus was not some divine play actor, feigning agony - a heresy raised by some in the early church, but rather someone who knew human suffering all too well, and symbolizing God's solidarity with those who suffer in this world.

Now, going back to the Last Supper, a communion that we will share on both Maundy Thursday and Easter Sunday. In the 22nd chapter of Luke, Jesus is at table with his disciples, and breaks bread, saying, "This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." Do this in remembrance of me. What exactly are we supposed to remember about him? Certainly, remembering his Passion is an important part of it, which Michelangelo insisted his relatives meditate upon - a way in which we can come to understand the intimate connections between his suffering and our own. But I think it's more than that - that we are called not only to remember that horrible week that ultimately led to the glories of the empty tomb, but, rather, the whole of his life, and all that he stood for - faith, hope, Justice, peace, and love. Hopefully we come to recognize that we remember him when we choose to walk in his footsteps through the things we say and the things we do. This table of food in front of us, generously given for those in need is an act of remembrance. Reaching out and giving comfort to the sick and dying, as well as visiting and praying for those in prison is an act of remembrance. Advocating for peace and Justice , and speaking truth to power, is an act of remembrance. Loving our neighbors, as well as our enemies, is an act of remembrance. Placing all of our trust in God is an act of remembrance. As we move into this holiest of weeks, let us remember him! Amen.

Let us pray: Faithful God, we praise you that you love us and that you have revealed yourself to us through Jesus to reconcile the world to yourself. We thank you that Jesus walked the path of obedience all the way to the cross and that you raised Jesus up to draw us to yourself. Jesus handed himself over to death, knowing that unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it will not bear fruit. Teach us, like Jesus, to hand ourselves over in love for you, for one another, for all people. We lift up our prayers for the world still so full of suffering, still so shadowed by crosses, knowing you have loved your creation from the beginning. We join our hearts with yours in love for the world, and offer ourselves to you; through Jesus, in whose name we pray...