

Deborah Sokolove: Palms and Passion

Palms and Passion

Today is Palm Sunday. Well, actually, it is Palm/Passion Sunday, but that is a relatively new idea. For hundreds of years, it was just plain Palm Sunday; all the Bible readings for the day were like the first one we had today, telling us about the time that Jesus came into Jerusalem riding on a donkey, and all the people shouted "Hosannah! Hosannah!" Hosannah. Now most of us do not use that word every day. In fact, I do not think anyone uses it much, outside of this story. What does it mean? According to my dictionary, it means something like "please save me." The Gospels were written mostly in Greek, but this word is in Aramaic, the language that Jesus probably spoke with his family and friends. Therefore, when people translated the Bible into English, they decided that the words that were written in Aramaic should just be brought over into English pretty much as they were.

My dictionary also tells me that "hosanna" is an exclamation of praise. Therefore, when Jesus came into Jerusalem and the people shouted "Hosannah," they were really shouting and cheering for him, the way we do when we are at a parade, a concert or a sporting event, and our favorite politician, singer, or ball player comes into sight. I see that many of you have palm fronds in your hands. In Jesus' time, that is what people waved. We wave banners and pennants the same way. For many people, Jesus was a hero, a celebrity. They had heard many stories about him healing people who were sick, making blind people see, and even, in one or two cases, bringing dead

people back to life. Many came to believe that he would help them get rid of the Roman authorities who were making their lives miserable. Therefore, when he rode into Jerusalem on that donkey, they shouted and waved palm branches, so that he would know how much he meant to them.

So if you were in a crowd, and caught sight of someone famous that you really admired, what would you do? You probably would not shout "Hosannah!" what would you shout? Would you whistle and wave? Let's try it...

Ok, now that we know what the "Palm" part of Palm Sunday is about, let's talk about the "Passion" part. By now, probably everyone is tired of hearing about that movie, "The Passion of the Christ." Whether you have seen it or not, you probably have ideas and opinions about it, but I do not want to talk about the movie. What I do want to talk about is why Palm Sunday became Palm/Passion Sunday.

The word "passion" comes from a Latin word that means, "to suffer." In relatively recent times, it has come to mean any kind of strong feeling or emotion, but originally the word signified the way a person would feel when being tortured. Therefore, the phrase, the Passion of Christ, came to refer to the sufferings of Jesus during the time between his arrest and his death on the cross.

Many years ago, when most people lived within an easy walk of the churches they attended, the last days of Lent were a time of intense spiritual preparation for Easter. Even now, in some churches, each day of the week following Palm Sunday-Holy

Week-has special services in which the events of Jesus last days on earth are remembered. On Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday of Holy week, some congregations gather to worship at dawn or at noon, retelling the stories of Jesus' life. As Holy Week ends, many churches, like Seekers, have a service in the evening of Maundy Thursday, commemorating Jesus' last meal with his disciples, and his command to serve one another and wash one another's feet. Other churches also have a special three-hour service starting at noon on Good Friday, remembering all the stories about Jesus' death on the cross. Finally, in the middle of Saturday night, communities gather one more time to build a big bonfire, and by candle light, retell in story, drama, and song the important moments of God's work on earth, from the Creation, through the Tower of Babel, the great Flood, the lives of the first families of the Hebrew people, the Exodus from Egypt, and the entire life, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. As the end of all the songs and stories, everyone shares Communion, celebrating the good news that Christ is risen. As you can imagine, the Easter Vigil takes a long time-often until dawn, in fact. Moreover, some people, especially those who go to all these services, fast they eat nothing from the end of Communion on Maundy Thursday until Communion at the end of the Easter Vigil. By the time they get to that, they are so hungry that Communion really does seem like a heavenly feast.

However, people often live or work too far away to go to a service for an hour in the middle of a busy day, or they only think about going to church on Sunday mornings. Therefore, little by little, many people stopped hearing the story of Jesus' sufferings. They would come to church on Palm Sunday, and celebrate Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and the following Sunday, it would be Easter. In some ways, it got too easy to forget that death has to come before resurrection.

And so some people who think deeply about Christian worship got together, and suggested that Palm Sunday be renamed Palm/Passion Sunday, and suggested that-for the sake of those who couldn't get to church between today and next Sunday-on this day we would remember the cheers, but also remember that Jesus suffered and died.

What are we to make of that suffering, that death? 1Peter 2:24, calling upon the imagery of the Isaiah passage we heard read earlier, answers, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed."

Another answer is that the Roman authorities got nervous, afraid that he really would lead a rebellion, since some people were calling him the Messiah, the one appointed by God to be king. Another is that some of the religious authorities thought he was out of line, telling people that God was his father. On the other hand, maybe some of them realized that he was making them look bad, with his teaching of love and forgiveness instead of rigid rules. The Gospel writers aren't very clear about exactly why Jesus got into trouble, but it seems that a few days after that ride into Jerusalem, he was arrested, tried, and convicted of something like treason. Moreover, the penalty was death by crucifixion.

Jesus, of course, was not the only person ever crucified. It was a favorite method for the Romans to get rid of people that they considered dangerous. Historians tell us that perhaps thousands of people were crucified around the same time that Jesus was, and all of them suffered a terrible death. Although the people in the Middle Ages made a big deal out of Jesus' suffering on the cross, and I have heard people lately talking

about how he suffered more than anyone did, the Gospel accounts agree that he died relatively quickly, within three hours, when others might have taken days to die.

So maybe the suffering of Jesus is not the point, after all, at least not the way that some people would like to have us think. A word related to "passion" is "compassion," literally "suffering with." In the Christian Teachings class in the School of Christian Living, one of the questions David has asked us to wrestle with is "Was Jesus God?" I wrote,

"I don't know if Jesus was God in any literal, exclusive sense. I believe that people saw God in Jesus, both before and after the resurrection, but that is not exactly the same thing. For me, Jesus is the human face of God, the one to whom and through whom I can sometimes approach a God that to me is still, too often, remotely abstract."

If Jesus is the human face of God, it is through Jesus that we can know the compassion of God. Jesus embodied compassion in his life and in his death, refusing repeatedly to add to the suffering in the world by paying back evil with good. Jesus suffered and died, as many people suffer and die, as the result of human sinfulness. Those who condemned Jesus to death did so because they could not accept the reality of God's compassionate love. In suffering on the cross, Jesus lived out of one of the many modes of human suffering without falling into the trap of wanting to hurt his tormentors. Instead, he asked God to forgive them, and compassionately assured the thief on the cross next to him that "today, you will be with me in Paradise" The Passion of Christ is a demonstration of God's loving compassion, not as a substitutionary atonement for our sins, but because God suffers the results of sin with

us. As we enter the solemn days of Holy Week, let us remember that Christ walks with us in compassion, showing the way to new life.