

“Waving Palms and Shouting Hosannas” by Deborah Sokolove

March 16, 2008



Every year, when we come to this day, the Sunday before Easter, Celebration Circle asks, which lections shall we read? Perhaps we should celebrate Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and read Matthew 21:1-11 – as we just did – from the liturgy of the Palms. In many churches, everyone waves palm fronds and shouts “hosanna!” When memory merges with present reality, when we enter the story that we have heard so many times that we can nearly recite it by heart, we become the crowd that greeted Jesus as he entered Jerusalem riding on a borrowed donkey. We become that “very large crowd” who spread their cloaks on the road,

and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of our God! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

I often wonder whether I would have been in that crowd, and if I were, whether I would have been among those asking "so, who is this guy?" or whether I would have been throwing down my cloak, cutting down tree branches, and shouting "hosanna"? Probably, I would have stayed quietly at home, safely out of the way of both demonstrators and police, unwilling to believe that this Jesus was anything more than just another rabble-rouser, coming to stir up trouble with the authorities.

It's easier, of course, in hindsight, to enter into the spirit of celebration. After all, now I know that Jesus wasn't just any old prophet, but someone who continues to live, 2000 years after he was crucified and died on a hill near Jerusalem.

And it's easier still because I say the words so often, whenever Holy Communion is celebrated in the chapel at Wesley, or whenever I visit a church whose Eucharistic prayer follows the ancient pattern. In that pattern, the celebrant retells the story of God's journey with the people of God, ending: "With all the prophets, martyrs, and saints, and all the company of heaven, we sing..." and the people respond with the Sanctus:

Holy, holy, holy One, God of power and might. Heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of our God. Hosanna in the highest.

But, of course, in recent years Palm Sunday has become Palm/Passion Sunday, so that no one makes the error of jumping from the triumph of the Palms to the triumph of Resurrection without entering into the dark reality of Jesus' death on the cross. Many churches have a kind of double service, in which a short "liturgy of the Palms" is followed by the "liturgy of the Passion." Since we don't have the time or the resources to do both, perhaps, Celebration Circle reasons, it would be better simply to read the Passion narrative towards the end of the Gospel According to St Matthew. This long recounting of Jesus' last meal with his disciples; his betrayal and vigil in the garden; his trial, scourging, and crucifixion; and his death and burial, begins with Matthew 26:14,

Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, "What will you give me if I betray him to you?" They paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him...

and ends in chapter 27 with the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate, saying

"Sir, we remember what that impostor said while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise again.' Therefore command the tomb to be made secure until the third day; otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell the people, 'He has been raised from the dead,' and the last deception would be worse than the first." Pilate said to them, "You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can." So they went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone.

The problem with this option is that the passage is so long that it is easy to tune out, to think “I know this story. I’ve heard it a thousand times before. What could there be in it that I don’t already know?”

One of the methods that the church has historically used to help people enter the story anew each year is to retell it in a compelling way. Last year at this time, I invited you into a traditional meditation known as the Stations of the Cross. This year, I would like to offer another jewel from the rich treasury of tradition, known as the Solemn Reproaches of the Cross. In an article introducing the Reproaches on the Reformed Worship magazine website, John Paarlberg, minister for social witness and worship for the Reformed Church in America, writes

The Solemn Reproaches is an ancient text of Western Christendom ... The reproaches follow the pattern of Psalm 78, which rehearses God’s continuing acts of faithfulness and Israel’s repeated rebellion.

Each reproach follows a similar pattern, calling to mind God’s saving acts and concluding with the same words: “but you have prepared a cross for your Savior.” Following each reproach the congregation responds with a prayer for mercy ... the traditional Trisagion (“the thrice holy” sung response from the Orthodox tradition...).[1]

Like the Stations, the Reproaches are frequently part of a three-hour long Good Friday service. Many people are troubled by them, seeing in them a justification for anti-Semitism and the ancient charge against the Jews as Christ-killers. This

concern is easy to see, as the Reproaches are written as if said by Jesus, asking his people what he has done to them. Coming towards the end of a dramatic, emotional service that ends with the death of Jesus on the Cross, texts like this often stirred an already volatile crowd to acts of violence against Jews in towns throughout Europe and Russia well into the 19th century. My own grandmother used to tell me about the Good Friday pogroms in her little village outside Lodz, in pre-World War I Poland.

The version of the Reproaches which I bring you today recognizes this ugly history, and repents. Here, they are returned to their original intent, which is not condemnation of others, but rather examination of self, both individually and as the Church. In them, Jesus asks us, who claim to follow him, to put ourselves into every moment of God's story with the people of God; to look at our own lives in the light of that story; and to see how we contribute to Christ's ongoing crucifixion in the suffering of our brothers and sisters.

Listen, then, and respond to Jesus, as he asks us what he has done to offend us, and why we continue to prepare a cross for our Savior. The traditional response to each reproach is the Trisagion, the thrice-holy, which echoes the sanctus in declaring the holiness and mystery of God.

Holy God, Holy and mighty, Holy Immortal one, have mercy on us.

O my people, O my church,

what have I done to you,

or in what have I offended you?

Answer me.

I led you forth from the land of Egypt
and delivered you by the waters of baptism,
but you have prepared a cross for your Savior.

Holy God, Holy and mighty, Holy Immortal one, have mercy on us.

I led you through the desert forty years,
and fed you with manna.

I brought you through tribulation and penitence,
and gave you my body, the bread of heaven,
but you have prepared a cross for your Savior.

Holy God, Holy and mighty, Holy Immortal one, have mercy on us.

What more could I have done for you
that I have not done?

I planted you, my chosen and fairest vineyard,
I made you the branches of my vine;
but when I was thirsty, you gave me vinegar to drink
and pierced with a spear the side of your Savior,
and you have prepared a cross for your Savior.

Holy God, Holy and mighty, Holy Immortal one, have mercy on us.

I went before you in a pillar of cloud,
and you have led me to the judgment hall of Pilate.

I scourged your enemies and brought you to a land of freedom,
but you have scourged, mocked, and beaten me.

I gave you the water of salvation from the rock,
but you have given me gall and left me to thirst,
and you have prepared a cross for your Savior.

Holy God, Holy and mighty, Holy Immortal one, have mercy on us.

I gave you a royal scepter,
and bestowed the keys of the realm,
but you have given me a crown of thorns.

I raised you on high with great power,
but you have prepared a cross for your Savior.

Holy God, Holy and mighty, Holy Immortal one, have mercy on us.

My peace I gave, which the world cannot give,
and washed your feet as a sign of my love,
but you draw the sword to strike in my name
and seek high places in my realm.

I offered you my body and blood,
but you scatter and deny and abandon me,
and you have prepared a cross for your Savior.

Holy God, Holy and mighty, Holy Immortal one, have mercy on us.

I sent the Spirit of truth to guide you,
and you close your hearts to the Counselor.
I pray that all may be one in the Holy and in me,
but you continue to quarrel and divide.
I call you to go and bring forth fruit,
but you cast lots for my clothing,
and you have prepared a cross for your Savior.

Holy God, Holy and mighty, Holy Immortal one, have mercy on us.

I grafted you into the tree of my chosen Israel,
and you turned on them with persecution and mass murder.
I made you joint heirs with them of my covenants,
but you made them scapegoats for your own guilt,
and you have prepared a cross for your Savior.

Holy God, Holy and mighty, Holy Immortal one, have mercy on us.

I came to you as the least of your brothers and sisters;
I was hungry and you gave me no food,
I was thirsty and you gave me no drink,
I was a stranger and you did not welcome me,
naked and you did not clothe me,
sick and in prison and you did not visit me,
and you have prepared a cross for your Savior.

Holy God, Holy and mighty, Holy Immortal one, have mercy on us.

Amen.

[1] John Paarlberg, "The Solemn Reproaches of the Cross: An Ancient Ending for a Good Friday Service," http://www.reformedworship.org/magazine/article.cfm?article_id=1177 , accessed 3/15/08