

St. Francis Episcopal Church
Palm/Passion Sunday – St. Matthew’s Passion
© The Rev. Dr. Richard M. Simpson, March 16, 2008

During the five weeks of Lent, we used a prayer after the post-communion prayer that many of you commented on, a prayer that concluded, “because the world will die without it, go with love.” If I had a nickel for every person who asked me for a copy of that prayer I’d be preparing for retirement at the end of this month rather than sabbatical! When I responded that it was on the cover of the bulletin each and every week of Lent the response was one of amazement and wonder!

And so I call your attention on this day to the quote found on the cover of this week’s bulletin, from a book by Archbishop Rowan Williams.

Holy Week, with all its intensity of ritual and imaginative elaboration, comes paradoxically to break down the walls of self-contained religion and morality and to gather us around the one true holy place of the Christian religion, Jesus himself, displayed to the world as the public language of our God, placarded on the history of human suffering that stretches along the roadside. This is a week for learning—not management, bargaining, and rule-keeping but naked trust in that naked gift. (*A Ray of Darkness*)

I love the liturgies of the Episcopal Church and I especially love the liturgies of this week. Normally of course we would be parading outside on this day with our palms. But whether inside or outside there is drama in this liturgy as there is in all of the liturgies for this week: On Thursday we will break bread and wash feet and strip the altar; on Friday we’ll carry the cross on an ecumenical walk through the streets of Holden; on Saturday night we’ll gather to light the Paschal candle, the light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

But these intense, imaginative rituals come to us not as ends in themselves, but as a way to come into the presence of Jesus Christ. The goal is not to create insiders and outsiders or to make the Church into a club or, for God’s sake, to try to create something so oxymoronic as “organized religion.” It is rather, as Archbishop Williams points out, to break down the walls of self-contained religion and morality. It is to encounter Jesus of Nazareth in the flesh, in his full humanity as he shares the Passover meal with his friends and washes their feet only hours before they betray and deny and abandon him. It is about this Jesus who wrestles with God’s will and with the hard challenge of discerning that will in the Garden of Gethsemane. Above all else it is about his arms of love stretched out on the hard wood of the cross in order to draw the whole world to himself. The events of this week are about a God who is willing to go the distance by entering into this “unsteady and confusing world” of ours to live and die as one of us.

Jesus is betrayed by one of his closest friends. I actually started to circling the word *betray* (and *betray*) in red ink as I prepared for this sermon and counted to ten before I stopped. It’s easy to scapegoat Judas, but it’s much harder to sit and think about what motivated him to do what he did. If he was just a terrible human being then Jesus apparently wasn’t a very good judge of character. But I think that Judas was far more complex than that. I imagine he felt disappointed

in Jesus at some level: he thought he was going to be one kind of messiah and he left behind a lot to follow him and then it turns out Jesus isn't what he thought he was at all. Maybe he convinced himself that this was all Jesus' doing anyway, for raising expectations only to disappoint people.

Then there is Peter. This weekend as our young people celebrated Palm Saturday we had not only a donkey here but a rooster as well. As a "city boy" I'm not used to hearing the cock crow but literally hearing it goes right through you: "I don't know the man." Or "I'm truly outraged" or "I can't believe it" or "I'm shocked, downright shocked that there is gambling happening here." Sometimes denial is outright, but sometimes it's the more subtle version we are all too familiar with: the "plausible deniability" which shields the powerful and allows them (like Pontius Pilate) to wash their hands of it all, head home for a dry martini, and sleep without shame or guilt.

This is all, I think, what Williams means when he speaks of the "public language of our God"—these events take place not inside of a congregation but in the streets and courtrooms and a hill set apart for the sole purpose of carrying out state-sanctioned executions. In the passion narratives we see the veneer of polite society being peeled back; we see what human beings are capable of and just how easy it is for the innocent to suffer whenever the powerful collude. All of that takes place not just on a hill far away a long, long time ago but right now, right here in our world, a world where trusts are betrayed and relationships are denied and where fear and death seem to rule the day.

Our prayer today, as we entered into this worship space, was that "we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace." Do you believe that? What on earth does that mean? How can death lead us to life?

In Paul Auster's novel, *In the Country of Last Things*, the masses are homeless and theft is so rampant it is no longer a crime and death is the only way out. "We have all become monsters," the narrator says, "but there is almost no one without some remnant inside of him of life as it was." (20)

It is that remnant, that "divine spark" that is within each of us (or what we as Christians would call the "image of God") that sustains us and gives us hope that the journey does not end at the foot of the cross. So I won't give away the novel but there is this place, called Woburn House, where people come to live in community and to share in the work of salvaging what can be salvaged in this "country of last things." It isn't an enchanted realm or an earthly paradise, but very much a part of that real world in all of its pain and hurt and struggle. It gives people a chance to be a participant in something that gives them "a chance to find their own strength." Woburn House became a beacon of hope, a sign of life in a broken and estranged world.

I think that's a pretty good metaphor for what the Church is called to be about in this time and place. I think it's what Jesus means when he talks about being the light of the world and the salt of the earth and the yeast that makes the bread rise.

We know all too well about denial and betrayal and homelessness and death. We know about a "justice system" that puts the innocent on death row as the guilty walk away. Palm Sunday is all

too familiar to us. But we are called to be servants of Jesus—to be witnesses to his resurrection, to be “an Easter people.” Jesus faces death so that we might be raised with him to new life—that’s where this story is leading us. (So be sure to come back here next weekend to hear once again how the story turns out.)

But before there can be new life we have to wrestle with all that old stuff. It isn’t easy because death brings out both the best and the worst in people. We are called to be people in whom it brings out the best by allowing that divine remnant within us to shine through our lives. It is only after we enter into the story before us today, that we dare to even begin to speak of such things as forgiveness, and healing, and transformation, and reconciliation, and faith, and hope, and love—and the new life that resurrection brings. Speak of these things we must, and speak of them we will, but all of that in due time.

In the meantime, because the world will surely die without it—go with love.