

Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord, Cycle A

Matthew 21:1-11; Philippians 2:6-11 and Mt 26:14-27:66

On March 29, President Trump extended the recommendation to distance ourselves socially until at least the end of April. If we do, Pennsylvania is projected to have 3,000 deaths; the nation could see 100,000-200,000 deaths. It is not a matter of "How much do I *want* to shelter in place?" Lives hang in the balance. On Saturday, I spoke with my dear friend Colleen, a palliative care nurse practitioner at a major hospital in Ohio. The staff there are arranging for families to be with their dying loved ones virtually, because it is too dangerous for physical good-byes.

If we have ever pretended that death is not real or that death can be experienced on our terms, we cannot do so in the face of this pandemic. I think this is part of why we are so troubled. How blessed we Christians are to have Holy Week, a time to pray about that which we fear so much! How blessed we are that God has shown us how to die and how to understand death as one moment in a larger reality! Let us consider a few facets of this complex spiritual diamond.

Matthew's version of the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem presents Jesus as commanding, the longed-for king of the Israelites. Both Jews and Romans knew that the Passover is ultimately a story of overthrowing one's oppressor; everyone in the city wonders if a rebellion is imminent. Jesus' entrance shakes them like an earthquake. However, unlike Roman generals, who celebrated their violent victories with elaborate parades, Jesus enters alone, "meek and riding on an ass." As he knowingly rides towards his death, is Jesus somehow majestic and humble at the same time? To be humble, literally "made of earth," is to know we must return to it; at the same time, accepting this reality ennobles us.

The lectionary skips Philippians' introductory verse, "Be of the same mind as Christ Jesus..." As God, he could have rejected death, but he saw it as an opportunity to pour himself out for others. Do we approach life with that same mindset? When difficult situations arise, we have the opportunity to show love and concern, even if it is unpopular, even if it wears us out or requires us to change. Many of us frequently do this for our families, but Jesus did not put limitations on whom he would help. Love in its fullest form places no conditions; it goes beyond the Self completely. Philippians asks us to spend ourselves in love without counting the cost. One way or another, we will be killed or wear ourselves out. Why not do it for love?

The second half of this hymn of praise begins with "Because of this, God greatly exalted him," and reminds us that Jesus redeems all beings. This contradicts the assumption that death is a personal affair, unconnected with the deaths of others. Jesus' overcoming his own death means he can overcome death for us. Jesus' selfless outpouring makes our selfless outpouring possible too. Jesus calls the cup of wine at the Last Supper his "blood of the covenant." He refers to Exodus 24, where the covenant was sealed by sprinkling blood on the altar, representing God, and on the people. The Israelites saw blood as life itself; God promised that the life force of God would always be available to them.

Throughout Matthew's Passion, Jesus refuses to use force. He will not retaliate when the mob comes to seize him in the garden. He will not defend his identity at his trials. He already made clear who he is; people must decide whether to accept or reject him. Many inflict violence and humiliation on him, but Jesus does not avenge himself. As our movies and defense budget show, we disagree with this choice. Jesus counters, "They who live by the sword will die by the sword."

Jesus did not live by the sword, yet he experienced a violent death. In today's pandemic, many good people are suffering and dying. How is any of this fair? The gospels do not shrink from this very real question. Even Jesus cries out, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" Easter Sunday does not eliminate the pain of Good Friday. A "good death" does not mean no suffering. It means we know we have loved as much as we could. It means we have those who love us with us somehow, just as the women stayed with Jesus. It means we remember that the blood of Jesus ties us to the life force of God. Easter is coming!

- ❖ What comfort can you find in the Christian view that death is just a moment in time, simply transitioning us from one stage of life to another?
- ❖ God uses everything to draw us closer in love. What lessons of love are you being asked to learn in this pandemic?