Text: Palms and Passion

**Introduction**

It’s a fair question that quite a few people probably have. Why on Palm Sunday are we reading the passion account? And the answer is one that both requires a little church history, and at the same time stares us in the face. The church history bit relates to the lectionary – the set of church agreed assigned readings. No lectionary is mandated. Different times and places have used different lectionaries. Most of the Reformed world works without such lectionaries, because they don’t really follow the church year. But from somewhere back in the early middle ages the Old Western Church had set aside the 5th Sunday in Lent – last Sunday – as Passion Sunday. Today would have been Palm Sunday beginning Holy Week, with Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and then Easter. And the two weeks were called Passiontide. The middle ages wanted to make sure everyone had plenty of time to meditate on suffering.

And during the long time from the Reformation until the 1960s, that lectionary was just frozen. But the Roman Catholics during the time of Vatican 2 were changing things and Protestants that maintained the church year were ecumenically open to making some changes as well. And the result was the lectionary that we use. One of the big changes was eliminating the passiontide and smashing together the Sunday of the Passion and Palm Sunday. And what generally happened is that the passion reading just got moved to Good Friday and Palm Sunday was celebrated.

And remember, this was during a time of near universal attendance and blue laws. Not universal attendance in that 100% of people went to church, but universal attendance in that people who were Christian attended every week. And nothing really competed with the church. Remember, around this time, 1967 was the first Superbowl and there were tickets available at kickoff. The NFL didn’t own Sunday. So having the passion read on a midweek service was no problem. Everyone would be at Good Friday. And that time of the change was about the very last minute you could say that. By the 2000s, if you are a minister, you had to contemplate people who might show up for the triumphal procession of Palm Sunday and the glorious resurrection of Easter, and never contemplate the cross. I have a relative with a pretty good wit who calls himself a C, P & E Christian – Christmas, Palm Sunday and Easter. So the suppressed Passion Sunday resurfaced.

**Text**

But the juxtaposition of Palms and Passion often allow for an interesting meditation. How do you go from the Hosannas to Crucify in the course of one week?

You’ve probably heard multiple answers over the years, and I’m not here to declare any of the wrong. It was popular for a long time to preach about the fickleness of crowds. In a time of riots and street violence preachers reflected on the fact that mobs have their own mentality that no individual controls. If you join a crowd, to go in an opposite way from the crowd requires incredible fortitude. And depending upon the mob to make the right choice is a fools choice, because mobs are never about nuance or wisdom. The message of those preachers I think was usually following Jesus allows us to walk against the crowd in the right way.

I also remember it being popular for a while to preach that the crowds were two different crowds. The Palm Sunday crowd full of those who had come with Jesus from Galilee to install the King. The Passion crowd one gathered by the Chief Priests to sway Pilate. This might have more connection to the texts themselves, but I was never sure the reason. If the disciples had followed Jesus to the cross, maybe that distinction would mean something. But even the disciples would abandon Jesus. The impetus was an attempt to protect “The Jews” from the old charge of being “Christ killers.” No, no, that crowd that yelled “Crucify” was not all Jews. But again I was never clear on the reason. Because the proclamation is that if we want to know who yelled “Crucify” look at ourselves. We all have fallen short. And while the crowd’s cry of “His blood be upon us and our children” was the basis of “Christ killer.” The reality is that cry can have two impossibly deep meanings. It can have that “he means nothing to us.” But this is also the cry of everyone who recognizes their sinfulness. “Let his blood be upon me and my children.” Because it is only the blood of Christ that covers all my sin. If Caiaphas can prophesy, so can the crowd.

The juxtaposition that struck me this year in meditation is what each crowd calls Jesus. The Palm Sunday crowd calls “Hosanna, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD, even THE KING OF ISRAEL.” While Pilate time and again would say “The King of the Jews.” “What shall I do with the man you call the King of the Jews?”

**Christology**

And we are forced to ponder the difference between Israel and “the Jews”. And to be very clear the passion story is not an excuse for anti-semitism. This distinction is one that runs through out the Old Testament. It is one that Paul is constantly comtemplating. His brothers according to the flesh vs. those grafted in. And even with Jesus in something often attached to the Palm Sunday procession. John the Baptist would tell the Pharisees not to say they were the children of Abraham, because God could raise up children for Abraham from the stones. And Jesus would reply to the same Pharisees who were rebuking the Palm Sunday crowd, “that if they didn’t praise, the stones would cry out.” Israel is always the Israel of faith. Israel is always those who welcome their King. Israel is those who would cry out for the saving blood of Jesus. And even in the darkest times, Israel is present. “There were also women looking on from a distance…And Joseph of Arimathea took courage and went to Pilate.”

“The Jews” are always those who reject the Kingship of Jesus. And as Paul would say, “For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written, ‘none is righteous, no, not one; no one understands, no one seeks God…their feet are swift to shed blood.” If Israel accepts the blood of her King by faith to cover all her sins. It is this great mass under the term “the Jews” that thinks nothing of spilling the blood of the King. Who go so far as to say “we have no King but Caesar.”

Is Christ “The King of the Jews?” Yes, to the extent that he is the eternal King. Every knee shall bow and every tongue confess. But the devil, the world and our sinful flesh would always refuse him. But Christ is always “The King of Israel.” And all Israel – those graft in and natural branches – all of humanity that believes – all Israel shall be saved. And saved by the blood of the King.

**Moral**

And this is the crisis of the Kingdom. We are presented with the King, We are presented with the King entering in triumph. Not with soldiers and drums. No bells of triumph or city gates. But the King who comes humbly to us. So humbly that his path walks directly to the cross while he says nothing. The chief priests mock this King of Israel. “He saved others; he cannot save himself, Let the Christ, the King of Israel come down that we may see and believe.” The King of Israel accepts praise, but came as a servant. Came to give us his blood.

We are presented with the King of Israel. The Kingdom comes by itself. But does it come to us?

Do we take courage, even in the face of Pilate – in the face of the the devil, the world and our own sin. Do we take courage and say “yes, this is my King”. Or do we join the crowd in ridicule. “He can’t save himself, how can he save you?”

Which way do we say, “His blood be on us.” In faith that it is the only thing that works, or in jest?

**Eschatological**

We might worry about the final judgement or the division – the sheep and the goats. But that final division isn’t a surprise. That division takes place right now in time.

“Behold your King.” On colt and cross. Will you in faith have a King such as this?