

“The King Knelt Down to Cry...”

Text: “As He approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, ‘Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace.’”
Luke 19:41

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I repeat that one sad reflection on the life of Jesus of Nazareth is that his time on Earth was not a happy one, not at all. Of course he lived in the ultimate security that he was doing the Will of God and that would have brought a contentment all its own. But, he was born under unusual circumstances, whisked off into hiding in a foreign country for his first few years. He was reared in the country town of Nazareth, a little spot up on Galilee not noted for its sophistication or its wealth. We assume that he worked in the family carpenter's shop, but it would seem that he never got much satisfaction out of his vocation. He missed his whole childhood, tending, as Luke writes, to be about his father's business. He never had a date, not that we know of, never went to a dance, never married. He never owned a home. The Bible says that he did not even have a place to rest his head at night. He loved his mother dearly, but when the call of his Heavenly Father came, he had to abandon her as he traipsed off on his evangelistic tours of duty throughout Galilee and all the way down to Judea.

His father most likely died when he was young. When he said he was the Messiah, his brothers were sure that he had lost his mind. As far as we know, he never had a good friend; the ones who appeared to be, in the end all forsook Him and fled. When he reached out to heal the sick, teach the dumb, love the loveless, when he challenged the authorities and condemned hate and discrimination, they were threatened and made plans to kill him, which they eventually did. When he died, his sole possession was the robe they took off his back. Oh dear....

That's one reason I adore Palm Sunday morning. Thankfully there was a day when he was on top of the world. One day when the people cheered for him, one time when they waved their palms and shouted "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord!" Jesus was King for a day.

I hope there was or will be a time in your life (perhaps now) when you were/are/will be on top of the world, a time when you felt like you were special and blessed. The other kind are too easy to remember. I hope there is someone around you now who makes you feel that way, to whom your life is a precious gift. If there isn't, or if he or she is no longer with you, then shift your gaze over to Jesus Christ: in his eyes you are the one, the one he loved enough to die for – and that is a lot of love.

What we call Holy Week began with a parade down a rather steep hillside on the south end of the city, from the top of the Mount of Olives. I have been there, but I almost didn't get to visit it. I asked our guide to take us to Bethany. She objected that we still had to visit the Jordan River Valley, the Dead Sea, Masada and Jericho – all important spots. "Anyway," she added, "it's just a poor little Arab town up on the hill. You will be disappointed. . . ." At my insistence we went anyway, and she was right. It wasn't much, and worst of it all, when we got there no one knew anything about an ancient parade on Palm Sunday morning. Oh dearie me. The actual Bethany of the Gospels is not there anymore; nor is Bethphage, the other town mentioned by Luke, where they found the colt for Jesus to ride on. The hamlet is now called El Azariah. The population is almost entirely Muslim. They do not even have a Bible where they could read the story if they wanted to.

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That is also true in many different parts of the world. When we talk about spreading word about the redeeming work of Christ to save individuals and to change the world, we need to pray for and encourage those who are working on the Mission Fields! Mostly, our commitment to overseas Missionaries is on the wane. In a ton of churches it has stopped completely. The old argument is that "We have enough to do here." In the fifty years that I have been ordained we have had a straight downhill movement not only in our commitment to mission, but in the budgets and the number of members in our denomination. I hope those declines are not related to my presence.

We have officially changed our tone. We no longer want to proselytize anyone, lest we offend them by imposing "our" religion on them. We have become so tolerant of other peoples' faiths, so accommodating, as if it did not matter that Jesus Christ is God Incarnate and the unique and only Savior of the world. Everybody says that we are all trying to get to the same place anyway, just like they fly the French or German flags and we fly the stars and stripes. We bought into it, so why not let them have their religion and we have ours?

Well there is something to be said for tolerance and for setting aside our Western arrogance. But why? Why not? If Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world, we should not tip-toe around ballyhooing this or any other that. We should stand up and declare what we have to offer. We have withdrawn our spiritual forces from the battlefield. "Onward Christian Soldiers" is a hymn we sing no more. They told us it sounded so "warlike." If it was, and if it is a battle, then we are losing it. In Africa for example the vast growth and religious conversions are to the Muslim faith of Mohammed rather than to Jesus Christ our Lord.

Even back home, a widely read recent national survey details similar results in a most painful way. Those who identified themselves as "non-believers" were the fastest growing religion in the USA. Last year alone the Christian Churches of our nation lost staggering numbers of adherents. Four hundred thousand abandoned the Roman Catholic Church alone in one year. It remains as the single largest group with 67 million members. The Methodists and Lutherans, even Baptists and others, almost all lost tens and hundreds of thousands. Our own national Presbyterian USA denomination lost another three percent of our dwindling membership. We are barely half as large as we were 25 years ago, with more to come. I heard the other day in a meeting with Denominational leaders that while there is a bright spot here and there, organized Christianity is losing ground almost everywhere.

It should not be that way. There are many other reasons to be sure, but part of it is that we tip-toe around fearful that we will offend somebody. All religions are not the same and they are not equal. If God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, as the Bible says, if he truly is the Son of God, if Jesus was right when he said, "I am the way and the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father but by me," our emphasis and attitude need to change. We should pick up some Palm fronds and begin waving them not only in our sanctuary, but down at the corner of Trade and Tryon Streets.

I don't mean literally that we need to mount an orange crate in Uptown Charlotte; but we should let people know clearly the reason for our faith. My old theology professor used to say that if a house

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is burning and you know the way out, you are obliged to share it with those around you. That is always a problem in ecumenical matters. I am a great believer in ecumenicity. But, we need to meet each other with our banners flying, not with some diluted and watered down version of the faith. We need an honest declaration of what we believe and why. This is not child's play. We all believe in tolerance, as we should, but an old Jewish friend of mine, Rabbi Solomon Freehof told me years ago that: "Tolerance is a luxury when things begin to matter." And they matter now, more than ever.

I still smile at the Wall Street Journal article last year which featured a bold headline on the front page which read: "Famed Psychiatrist Analyzes the World – Finds That It Needs Help!" I laughed out loud. They paid him good money to decide that the world needs help! Any one of us could have told them that for free. The world needs help, everywhere! Karl Menninger once noted that, "We have a great impulse toward self destruction. It has always worked in the hearts of men, but it seems to be getting worse." He's right! Our plummet to self-destruction is bad enough to make a grown man cry. "The churches of America are committing global suicide in countless ways," he went on to say, "we keep expecting some great miracle to come, as if God will intervene and swoop down to earth to change it all for us." God will come, in his own time, but meanwhile . . . if anyone is going to intervene (Are you listening?) it has to be you and me. God is counting on us.

I mean no direct criticism but I have noticed that here in Sharon Church we tend to be secretive about our faith. We believe that what a person believes is an individual choice. Sounds good; saves trouble. But if you have found something you believe in, believe in it with all your might and share it. "Keep an open mind, but don't let your brains fall out!" Believe in it enough that it will make a difference in the way you live your life. March in the Parade of Palm Sunday or any other day, waving branches of every kind, shouting for all the world to hear: "Christ, Jesus Christ is the One who comes in the name of the Lord."

There is a little often-overlooked incident mentioned only by St. Luke which took place on the first Palm Sunday evening, after the parade was over. It seems as though Jesus went out on the hillside from which he could see the Royal City. That would have been easy. Jerusalem is surrounded by hills. From whatever angle you approach it you can see the whole city from afar.

In his case, mind you, this city was his spiritual home. Every Jew adored Jerusalem. Everyone was required to go up to the Temple at least once a year, preferably for the Passover. Being of the house and lineage of David, the "City of David" meant the world to him. But times were not good back then in the Capital city. It had fallen from grace. When Jesus looked down over it, he felt sad that Jerusalem had missed and was continuing to miss its Golden opportunity.

Luke writes: "When Jesus came near to Jerusalem, he wept over the city, saying, 'Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace; but now they are hid from your eyes.'" Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace? Oh dear. What message do his tears on Palm Sunday bring to you?

Well, for one thing, with me those tears raise the question of what Jesus would do were he to come

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back today and look over the City of Charlotte, or wherever it is you live – do you think he would be pleased and applaud for us, or would he rather kneel in prayer and shed tears? I think I know. There is so much in the world around us to make any and all of us weep.

There is obviously this dreadful turn of events in the financial crisis, brought on mainly by human greed and the willingness to cut corners, which has turned the world upside down and threatens to erode the roots of our whole way of life. I think our Lord would weep with those who have lost their jobs. Or their income. Or the safety net for their retirement years. Or the reserve funds for the education of their children. I think he would weep over the increasing numbers of those who have lost their homes, their furniture, their cars and worst of all, their enthusiasm to keep on going. I know he would weep with the hungry and the homeless all around the nation.

I think he would also weep over this increasing onslaught of violence which has marched on to the center stages of our lives, especially in senseless mass murders, like the one in Binghamton, NY, or my old Pittsburgh yesterday; but here and there and everywhere. It turns up almost daily to remind us how fragile we are and how dangerous it can be on the merry-go-round of human existence.

And he would weep over the pain and loss which come unwanted into the lives of those we know and love, in illness and auto accidents, in the breakdown of the human bodies, in the dismal record of how we refuse to curtail drunk drivers, and of course as all of us feel it, the horrid illnesses and the loss of ones we loved too much to lose. The tears of Jesus are everywhere. It is comforting to know that we have a friend on high to share our sorrows and our fears.

But then, remember what he said next: Would that you knew the things that make for peace, but “now they are hid from your eyes.” What does that mean? At least it means that we need to learn to embrace the ways and means of finding peace with those around us, to cross boundaries locally and then throughout the world. To hold hands with all of those who honor the love of God and the equality of all his children. We cause a lot of our own troubles and while we need to weep, we cannot stop there. Our tears are not enough.

A few years ago, the Canadian group called “Northern Lights” recorded a song which I heard again the other day. Part of it goes like this:

“As every day goes by,
How can we close our eyes,
Until we open up our hearts?
We can learn to share,
And to show how much we care,
.....

If we can pull together,
We can change the world forever,
But heaven knows
Our tears are not enough.”

When the problems of the world make you shed tears, go ahead and cry; it is alright to weep. We know of three times in the Bible that Jesus wept, but I am sure there were three thousand more. You cannot look out on the landscape of America these days, remembering all that we have lost, and not weep.

There is warfare going on in the world. Menacing tanks are rumbling down the streets of foreign lands, and planes fly over directing their bombs and missiles; but they also rumble symbolically through the safe and secure places where we live and work and study. Self directed bombs hit unsuspecting places far away in our fight to rid the world of terrorism; but they also explode right at our own feet. You don't normally see tanks on the streets, but on every way and highway there are monstrous, merciless, symbolic ones rumbling on, loaded with crime and drugs and murder and environmental warfare against the earth, and the diabolical ideas and pressures which threaten the future of our nation. There is the enormous power of alcohol and anger and guilt. They rumble on: immorality, pornography, fraud, crime, illegal aliens.

In addition, there is also the big "A" – apathy: people who don't care enough to do anything about it. Our tears are compassionate, but tears are not enough. And, watch out. We are each and all part of the problem. I am not exempting myself or the rest of us at Sharon Church. Bill Hudnut, in a book by that title, once called the church of Jesus Christ "A Sleeping Giant." Good book it is. His point was simple: we need to wake up and quit focusing our efforts on ourselves. Try to imagine what would happen if we ever woke up and shared the love of Christ with everyone around us in Charlotte and then to all the world beyond. We do fine, thank you, in taking care of our own members – most of the time anyway. But just imagine all we could do to help usher in the Kingdom of God. There are battles going on all over the world, and the enemies are winning, partly because they are organized and are devoted to their mission, but also largely because of the lethargy and self-complacency of our army.

What do you think will stop it all? Who will change it? The police? Oh for sure, they help; nothing brings me greater comfort in a dangerous situation than to see a policeman or woman arrive, willing to stand up to confront the danger and seek for peace. Like the solo policeman last week in Carthage who all alone still took on the madman killer in that nursing home, willing to give up his life for the lives of those inside. Good work. Or the three policemen who lost their lives in Stanton Heights yesterday morning in Pennsylvania, responding to a call of domestic violence.

But the police alone cannot solve the problem. We can add all the police we can afford. We can build larger prisons, but while they would help us to keep criminals off the streets and out of our homes, they wouldn't solve the problem either. The major force which can stop them is the power of each and all of us acting together to bring the power of Jesus Christ to change the lives of people. We need to get angry about what is going on. Righteous indignation in the name of Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus was capable of anger when things got out of hand. And we need to stay angry until the job is done.

Tears and outrage come, but then the tears dry and we all calm down, and unless and until we have

done something to change the situation, it all remains the same. And while we keep on keeping on, worrying for our health and safety and the lives of those we love, this other huge enemy is on a rampage.

Just this week while I was attending a meeting of local Presbyterian pastors, called to see what could be done to increase interest in the mission, I learned that we are being outpaced by other denominations in helping to share the burdens of the weak. One widely traveled leader there warned that the peek-a-boo approach to Mission is not what we are after. He said it was fine that we wanted to take a look at the world and to see overseas missions first hand. We have all heard it reported, "Oh, isn't it sad how poor and hungry they are; I couldn't hardly bear all those little children in Africa. What a pity..." But pity is not what we need. We need a clear definition of why we are going where and what we specifically intend to do in the name of Jesus Christ.

Do you remember what happened later in Passion Week when Jesus was on his way up the Via Dolorosa carrying the cross to Calvary? The cross got so heavy that Simon of Cyrene was commandeered to help him carry it. Along the way, Jesus noticed some women at the side of the road who were weeping. For all we know they could have been devoted followers who were aghast at what the Romans were doing to the Messiah. They were sobbing: "Isn't it terrible. An innocent young man is on his way to die. Why? For what? It sure is a crazy world." And they wept.

Now you would think that Jesus would have been grateful and would have had compassion on them. Their tears appeared to be genuine. They meant no one any harm. They just felt sorry that the world had turned on him, the nice young religious man from Galilee.

But he had had enough of tears, enough of people feeling sorry. They were stunned when he said, "Women, Why are you weeping? Weep not for me! Weep for yourselves. I do not want your tears. I know where I am going and why, and you do not. I do not need your tears so much as I need a response from you. Not pity but spiritual and moral power."

Well it is time to go, but before we do, I ask you, (1) first wave your Palms this morning and weep with Jesus Christ as he wept over Jerusalem; but then keep weeping all week long over the problems in the world.

But (2) second, when you dry your tears, determine to do something about it all, not just to turn back to the same old world. Turn over one new leaf in the renewal of your faith. Increase your prayers for the love of Christ to control you and to take control of the world around you. Let the love of Jesus Christ flow in every word and act you do.

Then when the tears are wiped away: (3) thirdly, go out and grab some palm branches and prepare the way of the Lord. Do something for his sake, and for the sake of everyone you know and for all the people that you don't. Get angry at injustice; but stay angry. Keep the fires of change burning. Use your time, and prayers, and money, and energy to build up his church and to go out to change the world for him. For now and forevermore. Amen.