

Palm Sunday, RCL, Yr. B
April 1, 2012
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It is Palm Sunday, the longest liturgy in Christendom. It's not your imagination; this really is going on longer than the norm. We Episcopalians are not good at long services.

The problem is that we're doing two liturgies, two holy days in one today. We started with the Palm Sunday liturgy and then, with the reading of the Passion that we just completed, we moved into Good Friday as well.

So why does the Church do this?

I'm inclined to tell you that we have no one to blame but ourselves. We do two liturgies today because we know that some of you won't be here on Good Friday. And we also know that Easter without Good Friday is as hollow and nutritious as one of those big chocolate bunnies you will put in your Easter basket.

A free floating Easter of new clothes, chocolate bunnies, peeps, jelly beans, and the occasional joyful acknowledgement that Christ is risen can provide a nice spiritual (sugar) high, like that bunny – but it does not nourish us, it will not sustain us, and it trivializes God's great work in our lives.

So, knowing that, but knowing also that, short of tying us to our chairs and prying our jaws open, it's not always possible to get us to receive what is good for us, the Church, in its wisdom, has decided to put as much of the important stuff as possible into our regular Eucharistic feast.

You can think of Palm Sunday as a regular family dinner wherein all the familiar dishes have been vitamin fortified.

First, we're given Palm Sunday and Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. In this part of our liturgy we're reminded what it was the people wanted, what they were looking for in a king.

They expected a military savior who would end their oppression and get revenge. The lust for revenge is not alien to the people of God. We may be warned not to indulge in it but there's no point in pretending we're strangers to it.

Just note the Psalms of the OT. The psalmists lament their grief and oppression, their pain and their loss. But what they're really mad about is that the people who did it to them keep getting away with it.

People hoped for even expected that Jesus was the one who would smite their enemies as well as restoring justice.

Their first clue that they were not going to get what they were expecting came as Jesus arrived. He rode into town not on a horse, the symbol of military might in that time, he didn't ride in perched atop an army tank. He came in on a lowly donkey. This Jesus came not to conquer but to preach a new way; to announce that, all appearances notwithstanding, the Roman Empire could not, would not, prevail;

He encouraged the people to stand firm in those proclamations even though it meant that the Empire would kill him, as he knew it would, as he knew it must.

But this morning we see the people, people just like us in many ways, still hoping for an easy way out – for someone to fight and sacrifice for them; to conquer for them; to win, for them, a peace that no one else can, in fact, bestow.

And when, on Good Friday, the chickens come home to roost, when the full weight of the Roman Empire fell upon this itinerate preacher, the son of a Nazarene carpenter, this herald of peace – those people, people not unlike us turned on him. Disappointed and angry that he wasn't what they expected, they threw him to the wolves. Even his closest followers distanced themselves – "I don't know him; he is nothing to me."

These stories of dashed hope, betrayal, failure, despair, cowardice, and fear... these are our stories. These are what get taken to the cross and the tomb with Jesus on Good Friday. These are what get redeemed, these are the people who get resurrected, on Easter.

Easter does not promise us that everything will be pretty; it doesn't tell us that we can just forget our problems, put our miseries and shortcomings behind us.

Holy Week teaches us that we achieve resurrection, redemption, and Easter glory not by turning our back on suffering or going around it, but by going through them and coming out, with Jesus, on the other side.

Easter is not here yet. Don't rush it. May you, instead, enter fully into this time of the Passion and have a blessed Holy Week.

Amen