

SAINT ANDREW'S CHURCH

Lake Worth, Florida

THE EVE OF PALM SUNDAY [March 15, 2008]

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GREAT EXPECTATIONS!

This is a peculiar commemoration! It is the Eve of "Palm Sunday," which memorializes Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem; tonight we recall the royal palm branches being waved and placed before him by a cheering crowd. This is also the Eve of what is called the "Sunday of the Passion" - from the Latin word *passio* which means "suffering." Although we have heard the portion of scripture that focuses on Christ's entry into Jerusalem, others will listen to the dramatic reading of the extended Gospel reading which again covers the torment and execution of Jesus Christ. Our worship is an odd mixture of joy and anguish. Neither the palms nor the passion would be significant or tolerable, were it not for the pivotal victory to be celebrated next week.

Jesus must have had mixed feelings during that ride into Jerusalem. He certainly sensed that after this grand entrance, his words and deeds would infuriate many influential people. He realized that many cheering him on would turn against him. Intent on their own wants and great expectations, they invested him with military and political leadership - which of course was very different from his ministry of teaching and healing.

Because Jesus did not fulfill their hopes, and because he enraged various leaders, numerous people in Jerusalem ignored him; some reacted maliciously. We know of Judas, who, disappointed in Jesus, betrayed him. We are aware of the religious establishment, which perceived him as blasphemous and as deserving the death penalty. We remember Pilate, who trivialized Jesus as an expedient sacrifice.

You and I have had relationships and situations collapse into apathy, even viciousness, when individuals are vested with unrealistic expectations. Children who imagine their parents as possessing absolute knowledge and power expect answers to all questions and approval of virtually every request; when Mom and Dad do not respond acceptably and generously, such offspring sulk and may become cantankerous. Likewise, how many parents infuse their children with imaginary interests and abilities? Some mothers and fathers envision a particular career (or the "right" spouse) for their sons and daughters, and they are grieved when their youngsters seem to settle for so much less. Disappointed parents may endlessly nag their children, because their fanciful dreams aren't gratified.

Sometimes we even expect too much of ourselves! We assume responsibilities beyond what we should; over-confident, we believe that we can accomplish anything coming our way. When we get in over our heads, we feel victimized and battered.

Similarly, consider what happens to some pastors in congregations where there are chronic, grumbling critics with unreasonable personal and professional expectations of clergy; they have a love/hate relationship with ordained people. On the one hand, they sincerely welcome their clergy with open arms; on the other, they expect pastors to serve as their ever-available property radiating regal piety and inexhaustible energy. When clergy do not abide by their unfair expectations, relentless clergy-bashing begins! Similar trials befall many teachers, health care workers, people in government and the political arena, and others in diverse service vocations.

Please don't misunderstand me! I am not implying that we should look the other way or approve of deliberate wrong-doing or negligence. I *am* proposing that many churchfolks, as well as other citizens, have developed an unforgiving pattern of creating revered leaders and subsequently brutalizing them - whether or not they deserve such treatment. Often this occurs, because we expect omniscient, omnipotent angels rather than mere mortals of good-will.

Along with the many people welcoming Jesus into Jerusalem, you and I might also invest him with

misguided expectations. Frequently, we fashion him so supernaturally that we look forward to magical solutions to our problems, even though he never offered wizardry. Now and then we become annoyed with him, when he unexpectedly challenges our loyalties and priorities, even our religious sensibilities; we do not receive him as God's Anointed One, our exemplary brother, prophet, and Lord.

We often fail to truly understand ourselves and others; we misread each other; we invest ourselves and others with fictional qualities, mistaken priorities, and deluded expectations. We insist on the delivery of promises never made, intentions never advanced. Consequently, many relationships and situations deteriorate and die.

The ride into Jerusalem must have been difficult. While the folk shouted "Hosanna," Jesus' inner suffering began. He knew that instead of the king they wanted, they were getting the Lover and healer they needed. Unknowingly, the people were greeting the prophet who comprehended their brokenness and would judge their lives as falling short of their true possibilities; indeed, they were hailing the Messiah who would declare their estrangement from God and proclaim a new age. Jesus understood that if and when they grasped his revolutionary mission, most would become either indifferent or hostile. Friday was soon to come. Utter Innocence, misunderstood and betrayed, would be ridiculed and martyred. Because of erroneous expectancies, maximum suffering would be inflicted on Love Incarnate; the world's alienation from God would come into focus showing its horrific reality and power. Nonetheless, the Creator's Word would not be silenced; Sunday would be hallowed by the exalted Christ.

Last Wednesday at a noon service I heard Bishop Gene Robinson preach. He pointed out the differences between being admirers and disciples of Jesus. He noted insightfully that it is easy to admire the compassionate Jesus -- to think he was an ingenious chap with really wonderful ideas. As Jesus entered Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday many admirers waved palm branches. Disciples, however, allow themselves to be called into the "hot furnaces" of life, accompanied by God's strengthening Spirit, to confront wrongdoing, including injustices. Bishop Robinson challenged the congregation that the real question is whether or not we want to be admirers of Jesus, or revolutionary disciples. Truly following Jesus is a whole lot harder than just admiring. Doing the work of ministry and working toward justice -- getting into some "Gospel trouble" - is what we are meant to do.

The palm crosses we take home tonight should be placed where we will see them often. They may remind us of our own unreasonable expectations of God, of Jesus, and of the Church; as a result, we might purge our beliefs of sorcery and illusion. Furthermore, our palms may inspire us to consider *carefully* our perceptions of each other, thereby reducing needless disappointments and even treachery. In any case, these palms always symbolize the pain which we as Christ's faithful disciples could be called upon to endure in our various circumstances - with the promise and hope of the Sunday ahead. Remarkably, the events of the first Palm Sunday through Easter Day have altered forever the way we Christians experience the "everlasting life" we begin here and now!

Let us bow our heads in prayer. *Almighty God, our source of wisdom and courage, grant that we may welcome your Word as He truly is. Uncloud our vision of ourselves and each other, that true affection and prudent ministry may flourish among us. Inspire us to let go of indifference and maliciousness when promises never made do not come to pass. And, guide us, so that our journeys are in accord with your great expectations of us. We pray in the Name of Jesus Christ our crucified and risen Lord. Amen.*

When Jesus and his disciples had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

**"Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."**

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

**"Hosanna to the Son of David!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!"**

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."