

TILTED TOWARD CHRIST

Palm Sunday: Called to Worship

Matthew 21:1-11, Philippians 2:5-11, Isaiah 50:4- 9a, Psalm 31:9-16

It seems to me,
whenever we write about Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem,
we should put quotation marks around the word "triumphal."
And whenever we speak the word we should use air quotes.
("Triumphal" entry)

This scene that unfolds in the Gospel of Matthew chapter 21,
could *only* be seen as "triumphal" in some larger, cosmic sense,
and *only* well after the fact.
At *that* time, on the *ground*, this "triumphal" entry
had to be one of Jesus' most discouraging public acts,
and for the people, as it unfolded,
one of Jesus' most disappointing and disillusioning public acts.
It was the beginning of what felt like Jesus' betrayal of the people.

Over the centuries, we have spiritualized this story,
and focused on one small part of it—
that is, the people's ecstatic, beautiful, and unhindered praise
of the God who saves: "*Hosanna to the Son of David!*"
"Praise to God in the highest heavens, the God who saves us!"
And it's right and good that we remember and celebrate this part.
That glory given to God by the people,
and the glory we are called to give today,
are indeed beautiful to behold,
and a worthy offering of praise to the God who *still*
is the God who saves.
"Hosanna" should *still*, today, be our heart-cry,
as we long for God to work in this broken world.
"Hosanna in the highest heavens! God, save us all!"
So let's *keep* waving our palms!

But let's *also* not forget the complete Gospel story.

This parade into Jerusalem, you need to understand,
was *not* just a happy celebration for Jesus, the much-loved rabbi.

They weren't following him with palm branches and song
because he was kind to children and healed people
and told interesting stories.

That could have been *part* of it.

But this march into Jerusalem was a political march.

No *question* about it.

The crowds were *openly chanting* Messiah language
straight from the prophets and psalms.

"Hosanna . . . save us . . . Son of David!"

Jesus, they believed, was the long-awaited Messiah to deliver them
from the foreign oppressors.

They thought Jesus was on his way to storm Herod's palace
where he would throw out the Romans,
and take over the throne of David,
and they would be a free and independent people,
once and for all.

They truly *believed* this.

Never *mind* the fact he was riding a donkey,
and had no army with him.

For someone who had turned water to wine,
and a bag lunch into a banquet for thousands . . .

For someone who cured people born blind,
made the lame walk,
and raised the dead . . .

They had *no* trouble believing he could also walk right into
the palace and make Herod's army fall to their knees,
if that's what he wanted to do.

There was going to be a blood-less coup.

He was a miracle-worker and he was their Messiah,
their Savior from the Romans.

"Hosanna . . . save us . . . Son of David!"

In recent weeks, on CNN and every news outlet in the world,
we've watched scenes unfold in the middle east,
that, while they are certainly different in many ways,
also bear some uncanny resemblance to this parade of palms.

Think about it.

The elements of the Gospel story almost mirror
the story that unfolded in Egypt a couple months ago.

In both stories, we have
the oppressed people
the brutal regime
the passionate hope for deliverance
the public demonstration
the dancing in the streets
the noisy celebration.

There are stark differences, of course,
in the use of violent force for instance.
I'm not suggesting that these revolutions in the Middle East
are somehow the triumphal entry revisited.
I'm only pointing out that this passionate and emotional longing
for freedom from oppression
that we see demonstrated over and over around the world today,
is *exactly* the kind of longing expressed by the people
who hailed Jesus as *their* savior-deliverer.
It is exactly the same. It is the emotional equivalent.

We *need* to understand this,
if we are to understand this whole Gospel story.

Because when we grasp it,
it makes perfect sense why the people turned on Jesus
at the end of that awful week.
It makes perfect sense why no doubt the same persons
shouting "Hosanna, hosanna" at the beginning of the week,
were shouting "Crucify, crucify" at the end of the week.

Because Jesus let them down . . . utterly.
Upon entering the city, he did *not* storm Herod's palace.
In fact, he didn't even seem *interested* in the palace.
He went directly to the temple,
and started unleashing his righteous anger *not* against Herod,
but against his own people,
who were profiting commercially from the worship of God.

We didn't read that far in today's Gospel passage.

We stopped at verse 11, with the hosannas ringing in our ears.
Now listen to verses 12 and 13.

"Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling
and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money
changers and the seats of those who sold doves. He said to them, "It
is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you are
making it a den of robbers."

It's not to say Jesus didn't *care* about Herod and Caesar.
I'm sure he had *deep* feelings about Roman oppression.
But Jesus had an even *deeper* concern.
His own people were losing their way.
It wasn't just Rome that kept them from living full and free.
They were doing it to themselves.
They had forgotten what it meant to love and serve God
with their whole heart, soul, mind, and strength,
and to love their neighbor as themselves.
Their faith and Jewish identity could thrive,
even under the most brutal outside oppression.
But it wouldn't stand a chance if they destroyed it themselves.

They were not treating each other with justice and compassion.
The wealthy were taking advantage of the poor.
The widows and orphans were not being cared for.
Those who had position and power were abusing it,
including, inside the very walls of the temple.
In the name of worship, money-changers were
making a profit off the less fortunate.

Jesus' own people were a people divided.
Lost without a shepherd, Jesus observed, with *tears*,
as he looked over the city.
They were a people who lost sight of who they were,
a people too confused about their identity
to realize their biggest problem wasn't Rome.
So Jesus, with the kingdom of God on his mind, and in his heart,
walked into his people's Holy Place in their Holy City
and confronted his own people with the truth

they didn't want to hear.

He knew full well what this confrontation would cost him.
It would cost him his overwhelming popularity with the people.
It would cost him the loyalty of even his closest disciples.
It would cost him his life.

In a matter of days, Jesus went from exaltation to humiliation,
from fullness to emptiness.
And he did so resolutely.
Knowing *precisely* that's what he was doing.
Even in the face of everyone around him
trying to remake him into someone else,
he didn't lose focus.

As today's epistle reading from Philippians says,
Jesus, "though he was in the form of God . . .
emptied himself, taking the form of a slave . . .
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death,
even death on a cross."

Amazing, but we are called to do the same.
As a church, we are called to have the same attitude as Jesus.

Verse 5 of Philippians 2, in the New Revised Standard, says,
"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus."
I *love* the NRSV translation, almost *all* the time.
But with *this* verse, they could have done better.
Makes it sound like I, as an individual,
have to somehow get Jesus' brain inside my brain,
so that I can think like Jesus thinks.
As if I, *individually*, can think my way into faithful living.
That's not at *all* what the original text intends.

First of all, the "you" is plural, not singular.
Paul is talking to the church, *as* church, *as* community.
Secondly, the word translated "mind" isn't really about thinking at all.
It's about our attitude, our orientation, our leaning, our tilt.

So when Paul writes "let the same mind be in you that was in Christ,"
he's *literally* saying,
you all, as a church community, must be tilted toward Christ.

I did a little word study on this word the NRSV translates "mind."
I learned some interesting things.
The original word, "phro-NE-o" can *include* thinking,
but it's about so much more than thought.
It includes "care, regard, feeling, affection."
It refers to an "underlying disposition."
Perhaps the *closest* word is "attitude."
And "attitude" means a lot more than the mood you're in.
You *might* know attitude is a term in geometry.
It refers to the angle of a certain line or object,
in relation to some *other* line of reference.
When an airplane is flying, it's angle, in relation to the horizon,
is called its attitude.
In other words, tilt.

I think that sheds some light on how to read Philippians 2.
We, as a church, as a community of the Kingdom,
are called to assume a certain attitude, a tilt toward Christ.
We are called to orient ourselves, as *Christ* is oriented.
We are called to lean in the direction *Christ* leans.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem at the beginning of that fateful week
he had a decided tilt.
He was tilted toward the Kingdom of God,
the kingdom of justice and peace and healing
and blessing for all peoples.
As much as the people wanted him to tilt *their* direction
and become a political savior,
As much as the religious leaders wanted him to tilt *their* direction
and become a supporter of their institutional interests,
As much as Rome wanted him to tilt *their* direction
and calm down any revolutionary talk,
As much as everyone else wanted Jesus to tilt in the direction
that would serve *their* own interests,
Jesus was tilted toward the Kingdom of God.

Jesus was oriented toward, was inclined toward,
had the attitude of, the Kingdom of God.

That's the kind of clarity, in the face of resistance,
that gets people into trouble.
That's what put Jesus on the cross.
It was his deep, unstoppable love and compassion for his lost people,
when others obsessed over *other* concerns,
legitimate though they were.
For Jesus, there was only one thing.

And *we* are called to same kind of clarity.
To be willing to empty ourselves, as servants of God,
as the church of Jesus Christ.
We are called to have the attitude of Christ.
To be tilted toward Christ,
wherever it might lead.

And for *that* matter, we *do* have a clue where it might lead.
We know where this tilt took Jesus.
And we are, today, beginning a week-long journey
of remembering and re-enacting the consequences
that Jesus suffered from assuming his particular tilt.
And by so doing, we are reminding ourselves
that it's *our* journey, also.
No, more than likely, we are not *personally*
headed toward public execution for our faith.
Although some in this world are *still* taken in that direction.

But we *can* expect resistance,
even strong and powerful and coercive resistance,
when we as a people . . . tilt toward Christ.

We don't necessarily know from *where* that resistance will come.
It *may* come from external outright enemies and adversaries.
It *may well* come from within ourselves.
There are powers at work whose aims look appealing,
but are contrary to the Kingdom of God.
We must be alert to those powers that would have us align ourselves

with the cultural values of wealth and possessions and
and pleasure and personal security at any cost.
And *instead* assume the attitude of Jesus who humbled himself,
willing to lay himself empty and bare
for the sake of the Kingdom, and
for the sake of the one who called him.

This week, with the apostle, let us resolve to empty ourselves,
to lay down our agenda,
to reorient our lives toward the person and priorities of Christ,
to tilt, together, toward Christ.

We may look odd, over against our culture,
when we assume this kind of tilt,
but we're in very good company.
God's people have *always* met with resistance—
Hebrew patriarchs and matriarchs,
early Christians,
nearly *all* the reform movements since then, including Anabaptists,
and Christians today who stand up to oppressive powers.

Being tilted toward Christ is never the path of least resistance.
So let's reflect on what that might mean for us.
Reflect, in silence, in scripture, in song.

I invite us to take the *Hymnal Worship Book*, and turn to #550,
“Living and Dying with Jesus”
This is a hymn that comes out of recent context, that of Croatia,
where being tilted toward Christ had life and death consequences.
It's good for us to remember what this kind of tilt can *mean*,
even today.

When you've found the hymn,
lay the book in your lap and take your bulletin order of worship,
opening it to the scripture response printed there.
As we begin our journey into Holy Week,
I'm going to read some more of the lectionary scriptures of the day,
from Isaiah 50 and Psalm 31
scriptures that remind us of the direction this week is heading.

These aren't the kind of scriptures we *usually* seek out to read . . .
but they are the scriptures we need to hear occasionally.
And this week is one of those occasions.

So let's sit in silence just a moment,
then listen to the scripture, concluding with the response printed,
then sing together this song of faith and hope.

[silence . . . then read . . .]
(from Isaiah 50:4- 9)

The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher,
that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.
The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious,
I did not turn backward.
I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.

The Lord God helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;
he who vindicates me is near.
Who will contend with me?
Who are my adversaries?
Let them confront me.
It is the Lord God who helps me . . .

(from Psalm 31:9-16)

Be gracious to us, O LORD, for we are in distress;
our eyes waste away from grief,
our souls and bodies also.
For our lives are spent with sorrow,
and our years with sighing;
our strength fails because of our miseries,
and our bones waste away.
We are the scorn of all our adversaries,
a horror to our neighbors,
objects of dread to our acquaintances;
those who see us in the street flee . . .

Leader: But we trust in you, O Lord;
We say, "You are our God."
All: Our times are in your hand;
deliver us from the hands of our adversaries.
Leader: Let your face shine upon your servants;
All: save us in your steadfast love.

—*Phil Kniss, April 17, 2011*