

## UNTIL WE GET IT RIGHT

I mentioned last week that people who celebrate Easter without coming through Good Friday are really celebrating Palm Sunday. What I did not tell you was that I love Palm Sunday. A true Palm Sunday is actually superior to Good Friday *and* Easter! I mean, in theory. Don't you really hope that some day we will all evolve to the point where we will greet and receive our rightful King instead of killing Him? Wouldn't that be wonderful!

Things being what they are – our alienation from God being what it is – Resurrection is the brightest light and hope, and the greatest mark of God's love, that this world knows. It is still terribly and dreadfully sad that God had to resort to the Resurrection – had to raise Jesus from a cruel and tragic death. It *does* mean that we killed Him. You can cheer all you want to on Easter, but none of it would have been necessary if we had not killed Him.

No matter how grateful we get that God raised Jesus, Easter is still a response to great evil. It should never have been necessary. *Palm Sunday* is the right and proper outcome of the story. It was right, it just didn't last – we didn't mean it enough. But acceptance and rejoicing and coronation ... and a growing friendship and loyalty and obedience ... and peace between us and God spreading over all the earth – *that would have been a good thing!*

Resurrection is the ultimate sign of how broken, wrong, and twisted our world really is – of how tragically rebellious the children really are. So we wear our crosses and humbly display the cross in our gathering places because it is our only hope – it is the sign of our salvation and redemption. But it also means we killed Him. Killing, after all, is what crosses are for.

What would *you* feel like doing if some people killed your son? And especially if he was only trying to help and love them? Those who recognized Jesus' true identity were dumbfounded that God did not destroy the earth. That was the only logical response they could imagine. When the sky turned dark and things got deathly still that Friday afternoon when Jesus breathed His last, the entire physical universe came

within a hair's breadth of a BANG that would have made the Big Bang look like a baby burp. If any of us had been God, that is exactly what would have happened. If you do not know that, you must never have had a child of your own, or at least not one that you loved. Yet out of some unimaginable love and mercy, God came up with an alternative none of us could ever have conceived. We got Resurrection instead of annihilation.

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The record is quite clear about Palm Sunday. Jesus rode into Jerusalem as Passover crowds were gathering. He did it in a special and unmistakable way, choreographed on purpose to declare Himself the Messiah: riding the donkey, as prophecy and custom expected; coming down the Mount of Olives and through the Golden Gate; crowds throwing palms and garments and shouting "*Hosanna!*" to welcome the true and rightful King. Not everybody felt the same way about it, but everybody knew exactly what Jesus was proclaiming.

It was a coup. Jesus took over the temple – and remember, there was no separation of church and state in Israel. He came to the temple each day to teach and preach, and He had so many followers that nobody dared to openly oppose Him. The Roman garrison was right there at the edge of the temple square, and any threat of a disturbance would have brought a brutal and ruthless response from the Roman soldiers. On the other hand, Jesus did not arm His followers, and He did not kill or incarcerate those who opposed His claim. Anybody could have told Him that such methods would not succeed for long in our kind of world. Within the week, His enemies – those whose power He threatened – found a way to overturn His coup and do away with Him.

If it has not yet clicked into focus, let it do so now: Apart from Palm Sunday, we could never have comprehended why the Crucifixion and the Resurrection were necessary. If Jesus had not made a genuine bid to take over the leadership of the nation – had not given the people a true chance to acknowledge and declare Him the Messiah (which means "the anointed one," the rightful king) – then all generations from His own down to ours would have wondered, and probably would have claimed, "Well, if you had given us an opportunity, if you had given us a fair chance, *we would have declared you our King.*" Yeah, right. After the Resurrection, it's easy to wish we had been a little more welcoming. But it had to be proved that we would not welcome our rightful King, or we would never own up to it.

Palm Sunday is about a King who began a great battle to take over a Kingdom that was rightfully His. This King Himself would not allow His followers to fight in the usual ways because the battle was on the inside as well as on the outside. The methods have to match the purpose, or the purpose is lost. It is a thing we humans have a very difficult time remembering. There was no way to “win” this kind of battle by the usual methods – the power and coercion approaches of our world. At first, people thought this meant the King had called off the battle. But what the King really whispered to His followers was: “This fight is to the death, and it is for the LIFE you will carry eternally. Therefore you cannot quit, and you must fight with weapons that are consistent with who you really are, and with the LIFE to come.”

Slowly, the followers realized that this King was fighting for a Kingdom in *but even greater than* this world. Everything else was just a drill. That is the reverse of how we usually see it. But then, this King has a way of reversing a lot of things – like fear, and hate, and guilt, and despair.

And if there is any place in *your* life where you are still striving for truth, excellence, love, or beauty, you will discover that your battle is connected to the Great Battle of this strange King. Palm Sunday celebrates the first major skirmish, the first public battle cry, the first time this King threw His gauntlet into the face of the powers that are killing the world He loves. He knew He would lose this particular skirmish, because He knew we were still too afraid to follow Him. But He also knew that He was starting the war – the greatest war of all – the one for the hearts and minds and souls of all mankind.

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Palm Sunday is not over; it is just unfinished in our realm. We saw only a faint and fleeting shadow of its glory here, but enough to know that God will hold it open for us until we get it right. That is why I still love Palm Sunday, and why I hope you love it too. We do not have to be stuck just mourning the failed version. We can remember it, and hopefully learn from it. We can also be making our own personal choices: to receive our rightful King, to celebrate Palm Sunday, and to really mean it.

Aren't I clever, making all this up just so you can feel good about today? No, indeed! I'm not that smart; I just keep reading The Book.

More and more of you are reading it too, and that makes it more and more fun to talk about. So, you picked it up in the Scripture reading already, didn't you?

*“After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb.’”* (Revelation 7:9-10)

The writer of Revelation is picturing the true Palm Sunday, when we finally get it right. On earth, a couple thousand years ago, it was just the Passover crowd in Jerusalem. Now it is a multitude beyond numbering from every nation, tribe, race, and language. This is verse 9 of chapter seven. Verse 4 of chapter seven is where some people think the Bible claims that only 144,000 will be saved. But is only 144,000 a great multitude which nobody can number? *Twelve* means everybody is here, everybody is represented. And *twelve times twelve* means everybody here plus everybody to come. *Then carry it to the thousandth power!* Just in case some narrow-minded literalist missed the symbolism, John says it straight out in verse 9: *“a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues ....”* Revelation is not the most miserly message-bearer among the New Testament writings – it is the most universal! (We might also remember that John lived in a world that did math with Roman numerals. Arabic numerals had not been invented yet.)

So we have moved from a Jerusalem crowd to the whole world. And they come in white robes, already purified and true. But they still carry palm branches, so you know that it is Palm Sunday and that they are receiving their true King. On earth, they had shouted *“Hosanna!”* which means *“Save us now!”* Now they shout *“Salvation belongs to our God!”* because it has already happened. John wants to make sure we make the connection between the two Palm Sundays – the partial one and the fulfilled one – but he cannot have them shouting *“Hosanna!”* He cannot have them calling out *“Please save us!”* when it has already totally happened, now can he? But the connection is still clear and obvious: this is Palm Sunday in its fulfillment. (I need some Pentecostals here. We should be bouncing in our seats by now, and soon dancing in the aisles.)

The Book of Revelation is about the Great Battle. Revelation knows the battle is on the inside as well as on the outside. It knows you are all in the battle, whether you know it or not, and regardless of what part you are currently playing. Revelation knows the battle has been going on since the dawn of time, and it knows that Palm Sunday was a major turning point in this greatest war of all time and of all dimensions.

I just have to stop and tell you a little bit about the Book of Revelation. Ever since Jacob and Joseph (and doubtless before), God has sometimes communicated with people through dreams and visions. Revelation is a vision. John (the author of Revelation, not the apostle) is not trying to write a history book. He has much larger themes in mind. Visions deal in imagery and symbol (much like dreams), and they are totally missed if we try to comprehend them in literal, unimaginative detail. When John describes the scene at the throne of God, for instance, he does *not* want you to get stuck, in some physically literal way, on the description of the four living creatures. John is using images (that is, the Spirit is using images through him) to give us a “feeling” for the four “powers and energies” upon which all Creation is based.

The four creatures (4:6-9) *represent* the four elements – earth, air, fire, and water – that the ancient world believed were the foundation of all created life. If you start trying to picture the physical appearance of, say, the third living creature, you will miss the writer’s meaning. You end up struggling with trivia. How can the creature have the face of a man yet have six wings and eyes all around and within? You see? Instead of flowing with the imagery and feeling the capacity of the creature to be wherever it needs to be in an instant of time, you start trying to figure out where the six wings are attached to the body, and how they keep from getting in each other’s way. Instead of realizing that this creature has total *awareness* of everything happening inside and out, you start thinking, “Gee, it must be really ugly with all those eyes.” It is so hard to communicate with people whose only level is, “Just give me the facts.” Facts are the lowest of all levels of awareness. True, facts are also the safest level. But it’s hard to play it safe with God, because God has so little fear.

Oh, not that we are consistent with our literalism, you understand. When we start talking about the marriage supper of the lamb (19:9), for some reason nobody tries to picture some woolly creature running down the aisle on four legs and bleating “I do.” Nor are we belabored with profound observations about what lambs eat for supper, as if that

would help us understand the marriage feast of the lamb. But let the Book of Revelation mention fire or beasts or dragons or horns ... then by God, it means just exactly what it says literally, and nobody better question it? All that does is take you into nightmares that have nothing whatsoever to do with what John is trying to say.

Just a small hint at some of Revelation's imagery: Christ is pictured in the mode of lamb rather than as a lion. Mythically, John has a right to picture the Christ as "The Great Lion of Judah." But on purpose, he chooses instead to picture Christ as the lamb. We are supposed to notice that there is a difference between the symbolic meaning of a lion and the symbolic meaning of a lamb. By the way, that alone should tell you that most explanations of the meaning of Revelation are totally off. *Lamb* is symbol of sacrifice and feeding – it is the food of the temple that brings you back into right relationship with God. *Lion* is symbol of power and rulership, and punishment if you are defiant. The Book of Revelation is about the mercy and love of God winning over and overturning the fear and terror of evil men. It is not about the fear and terror of an evil God who is finally getting even with men by being even more evil than they have become. In the fifth chapter, John switches us from Christ/Lion to Christ/Lamb – *and never switches back again.*

In John's imagery, the sword that finally conquers is not a sword of steel. Nor does it kill in the normal way. Christians (Hebrews 4:12) liked the imagery of the Word of God as a two-edged sword. It was a meaningful word-picture of the way the message of God's love and mercy could cut to the core of life – to the core of people like us, too – and reach us, change us, and convert us. Yet it would not kill us; it would kill only the old life that held us in bondage, and then only in order to give us a new and better LIFE. (Remember? Born of the Spirit – born anew.) And you could never tell which direction it would come from, or which direction it would take next. The two-edged sword is the Word ... it is Christ ... it is the message of salvation – not a weapon to hurt your body.

Revelation is picturing a battle in which the enemy will be defeated by the two-edged sword – meaning, the message of God's love. They (we) will be defeated because **it will convert them, not slay them!** Well, it will slay the old life of bondage to Satan. We will be defeated by a truth that will stab us to the heart with mercy and forgiveness and caring undeserved, and that will change us from within forever. That is the only

dying going on. Why are you trying to learn the Book of Revelation from people who think Jesus is Rambo? Or that John is a scriptwriter for Arnold Schwarzenchrister? The only blood Jesus spills in the entire Book of Revelation is His own. Do we not know *anything* about Him yet?

John did know the Gospel. So did his early readers. We can go to the history of the time and discover that the early church was not turned-on by a cruel, sadistic God. The Christian Faith was spreading like wildfire, and the power that drove and inspired it was about love and mercy, even for enemies. John was enthralled by how the *seemingly* weak power of Christ's love was more powerful than all the decadent, overt power of the Roman Empire at its worst. John's effort to convey this in imagery so striking that nobody could forget it ... has led us now to some of the worst mental atrocities in Christendom. How he must weep at what has been done with his book, and Jesus and His Message along with it.

*"He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored."* (19:15) What is your picture? Gore and blood and guts, and people dying with inhuman courage as they lay down their lives for truths bigger than they are? Is that what you think John is saying? I think he writes with tears of joy streaming down his face as he pictures the Christ transforming the processes of wrath into the wine of joy, probably the very wine they will use at the celebration of the marriage of the lamb – meaning, the uniting of Christ with all His people: the church. So John word-paints for us this wondrous picture of the barefoot Christ, squishing grapes in the great winepress of creation's ongoing story. Once, He turned water into wine to bless a wedding at Cana in Galilee. Now, on the cosmic stage, He turns wrath into love, and turns sorrow into celebration. Oh, such a horrid book! John thinks it's the best NEWS the world has ever heard: wine of joy and celebration, and now also wine of communion, reconciliation, grace, and mercy. What other kind of wine would the Christ be making? *Of course* He is trampling out the vintage of the grapes of wrath! Do you think He would leave that brew to poison His people forever? But if you know Him, you do not tremble – you rejoice and cheer. Don't you know what wine is for? (Well, some of us don't, but *you* are supposed to.)

The reality is, we have some conflict, some turmoil, and some changes to go through on the path between the way we are now and the way we want to be then, at the wedding feast. And the people around

us have some changes and turmoil to go through too. That is hardly a reason to turn our Savior into a sadistic brute.

You think I've forgotten all about Palm Sunday, don't you? Palm Sunday is about a King who begins a great battle to take over a Kingdom that is rightfully His. Only, this battle cannot be fought in the usual, physical ways. Jesus is after bigger game – more than a city; more than one earth-nation at one time in history. All of us are caught in the battle between good and evil – between life and destruction. We each fight in this fight on our own front, all the time. And by ourselves, we never win.

Once, on a Palm Sunday years ago, some people claimed their rightful King with palms and anthems and rejoicing. Doubtless they were sincere at the time. Yet they could not hold on to it. Before the week was over, they had wandered off, been outmaneuvered, or run away. Their King was left alone, to die. But He came back. And He still rides into our world – and into our lives – as He rode into Jerusalem that day. But only if we are ready ... only if we are willing ... only if we want Him. Which is exactly what He was saying on that Palm Sunday long ago.

He has enormous power. For that very reason, He chooses to use it *only* with our consent – at our request – if we are willing. Otherwise, you see, He is just another tyrant, however well-meaning. That is the problem. With power like His, it must be with our consent. So He waits, no matter what the cost, until we are ready and willing. It is His “waiting” that causes most of our confusion. But love has no other choice. And we have all learned to abuse His patient waiting for us.

The saints and believers down through the ages have told us that this battle will continue until we learn the secret of Palm Sunday and get it right. How about today? Would today be a good time to get it right – to declare Him our true and rightful King, and really mean it?