

St. Martin-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

Keller, Texas

Sermon for March 28, 2021 ~ Palm/Passion Sunday B

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In Baptism, we are incorporated into the Paschal Mystery. That is, we are incorporated into the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. His life is our life. His death is our death. His resurrection is our resurrection. It is for this reason that Christians the world over observe this Holy Week every year. It is a commemoration the essence of which is to put us in touch with that life which the world can neither give nor take away. It is a time to look at the Paschal Mystery – God’s redeeming work in Jesus Christ – and to recover our true identity in him.

In the powerful passage from the first chapter of his Letter to the Philippians, St. Paul describes the Paschal Mystery. Christ emptied himself of glory and left his throne in the heavenly realm. He came to be like us so that we might be like him. Heaven and earth are joined in Christ. He was completely secure in his identity and we find our own true identity when our lives are joined to his.

I need to know who I am. Each of us has this need. When I look for an answer, I must be very careful because if I receive a wrong answer, it could separate me from my authentic self and my life on earth will not be fulfilled. The experience of Jesus we recall on this day is an illustration.

Five hundred years before Jesus rode into the City of Jerusalem, the prophet Zechariah prophesied that the Messiah who was to come would be a king. The people in the streets of Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday must have remembered Zechariah’s prophecy because as Jesus rode in, they acclaimed him as a king. They gave him a king’s welcome.

It was a poignant moment because the expectations were quite high among God’s people. Since the time of the Exile, no Jewish ruler had borne the title of king. “Look, your king is coming to you. Rejoice, rejoice, people of Zion.” The time was just right and the people were happy that day to acknowledge it. They wished to crown him their king.

In their enthusiasm, they missed the paradox. They saw the glory but overlooked the shadow. But Jesus was conscious of both.

He knew who he was. Because he knew who he was, he was not overly impressed by the acclamations of the crowd. He saw that the palm branches they were waving cast the shadow of a cross. He knew that the kingly crown they were offering to him that day would become a crown of thorns by the end of the week. In short, Jesus knew that the identity offered by the collective acclaim and approval the world offered was not a secure identity, not a legitimate identity, and certainly not a dependable identity. No, for Jesus, the only identity is that consciousness of who we are in the eyes of our Creator.

Sure, Jesus wanted to be popular. Of course he wanted people to love him. Naturally he wished that things people told him would be true. But he knew better than to depend on the hosannas lifted by the collective voice of the people because through the glory they offered, he saw a cross he must bear and he knew that the glory of the Father was his ultimate goal. If you can’t bear the cross, you can’t wear the crown first applied to the Savior of the world, the sovereign of the universe.

But Jesus did bear the cross. He experienced the world's fickle acclaim, was subjected to the brutal, violent, and humiliating death by crucifixion. To the disciples, on the next weekend, it must have looked like the world's biggest failure, a cruel joke. Imagine being sucked into a group like "the Twelve." To them "the Way" must have appeared more like a primrose path. Because they were still so dependent upon the things of the world for their sense of identity, they had to be the most embarrassed people around Jerusalem.

Then came Easter. Out of the tomb came the Risen Messiah with his identity still intact. "He is risen" is but the echo of Jesus saying, "Behold, I have overcome the world." Behold, I died and I am alive. Behold, who you are need never again depend upon who you know, what you wear, where you live, what you do, how much you possess, or even what people say about you. Because I live, you will live also. You will experience new life in me and you will be able to face the popularity contest the world is running with confidence that you don't really have to enter it in order to find out who you are. Here, here is my crown, he says. It is yours! Take it! Be royalty within a royal priesthood. And believe me when I tell you that this crown of glory, which is both mine and yours, will never fade away.