

“An Unlikely King”
March 16, 2008 – Palm Sunday
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On Squirrel Island in Booth Bay Harbor, Maine, it seems there has always been a distinction made between those who RENT cottages, and those who OWN. This is a gorgeous island, one of my favorite places on earth, with beaches and woods and ocean and fields and wild flowers and Victorian era cottages on footpaths. There is a library and a chapel. There are no stores. It is a kind of paradise. I myself am a humble renter, and one is always aware of that slight difference in the air when a renter meets an owner on a footpath and says hello. This is not to say that folks who own aren't friendly, because they certainly are---but there is just that slight difference in status. I did read an article in the Squirrel Island Squid, the island newsletter, a couple of summers ago that really got to the essence of this renter/ owner divide. It recounted the story of one of the island cottage owners who for quite a period of weeks one summer was not particularly friendly to another person. Betty thought that Elsie was “only a renter.” After some time went by, Betty learned that Elsie was indeed a family member of one the island's bedrock families, a family that was a pillar of island life, and very much a cottage owning family! Upon discovering this, trying to make amends, Betty said to Elsie, “If I had known who you were, I would have reacted to you differently.” Hmmmm. Something tells me that this probably only added insult to injury, in addition to perhaps further revealing unpleasant truths about Betty's character!

On Palm Sunday, also called Passion Sunday, we have a couple of possible directions we can take things. We can celebrate the moment of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem at Passover, and the joyous but fleeting moment of recognition of his true identity shouted out in the streets that day. Tradition also gives us the option of reading through the account of the passion, the narrative of Jesus' suffering through trial, betrayal, and cruel crucifixion. We can even do both. Today we will linger a bit in the streets of Jerusalem with the cheering crowd and the waving palm branches. Today we will remind ourselves not to flee so quickly when we recognize Jesus in our midst. We will immerse ourselves in the last days and hours of the life of our beloved Lord Jesus on Thursday evening at our Tenebrae service, a beautiful service which I hope you'll be able to attend. But for now, let us remember that sometimes we do recognize Christ in our midst. Let's linger for a while in the “hosannas.”

Jesus' entry strategy was brilliant and evocative. He rides in as royalty, not with a powerful entourage of war horses and chariots, as the Roman imperial rulers might move about, but on a donkey. He carries no weapons, wears no protective armor. Matthew uses words from Zechariah and Isaiah to describe Jesus' entry, which gives us a sense that Jesus created this scenario with those scriptures in mind....a scenario that would say to the people: this is indeed the Messiah of God, the long awaited One. This is a humble king who has been teaching that the world must be won over by love and peace and justice, not by weapons and conquest and exploitation. One wonders whether this was a bit of street theatre, a message to the imperial power that then occupied fair Jerusalem, even as it may have been an effort to rally the faithful at the time of the Passover Feast. In any case, for a celebratory moment in time, it worked.

To recognize the presence of Jesus and the healing and peace-making power of his message and his Spirit is to experience a deep moment of truth. When we recognize who Jesus is for us, we also recognize who we are and why we are here. Such moments of recognition seem to come at times of high drama, high need, or high tension. We willingly seek and encounter Jesus when in these moments. We then recognize him in the faces of the people we love, the help and compassion of friends, the unexpected moment of grace and forgiveness, a kindness where none was expected, in courage and selfless action on behalf of the weak and the powerless. Reassured or inspired or forgiven or assisted or instructed, we determine we will keep his face before us, and we won't forget. Trying to sustain it on our own terms, over time, we lose touch with him. We forget to let him help sustain us. And so when he presents himself to us, the day comes again when we don't know him.

It's tricky, admittedly: the King who rides in on a donkey with local peasants cheering him on is not easily recognizable as a king. The king who says that if we want to know what he looks like, all we have to do is look at someone who is hungry or naked or sick or in prison may even be someone we are trying very hard NOT to see.

If we asked Betty of Squirrel Island fame, she'd probably tell us that she really does think that all people are equal. Even as she told Elsie that if she had known who she was, she'd have treated her differently, she probably recoiled on some level at the awful truth about herself revealed in those words. Once she found out that Elsie really was a local dignitary of sorts, she undoubtedly wished she could rewind the tape and start over again from the beginning and act kindly toward Elsie from the start.

This is how Palm Sunday can make us feel, as we are about to step into the sorrows of Holy Week. If we could only rewind to that moment of recognition of this unlikely King, if we could only sustain that moment and kept the hosannas going and fully embraced him and his message, it would be a very different world. If only folks had fully accepted his vision of our purpose and our relationship with God and one another, we'd have a just and peaceful world. Every time we fail to recognize Jesus, there is a little dying of possibility and potential that goes on. Holy Week is the time to own up to this, so that we can come out on the other side, where another very unlikely act of Jesus will dazzle us. Easter redeems us every time. How is it, then, that we forget him so quickly?

If they'd known who he was, they'd have treated him differently.
Do you see him?

Amen.