

Make Sweet Hosannas Ring -- Palm SundayB

“Make sweet hosannas ring,” we joyfully sing, echoing and reiterating the eager and giddy shouts of those people long, long ago and far, far away whose excitement and hunger for good news welcomed Jesus on his dramatic, theatrical burro ride. They lay palm branches in the roadway, in an exuberant, sacred gesture acknowledging the presence of divinity in their midst. At Succouth(s), the Feast of the Tabernacles, palms had been waved since Moses’ time to glorify the deity. “Save us,” is a translation of the root words of “Hosanna.” The Hebrew people followed the law in the Book Of Leviticus to bear palms on that feast day.

They were doing it even when, after fifty years exile in Babylon, the prophet Isaiah sang out the people would be vindicated and redeemed by their God, a God of enduring love and ultimate goodness who would hear, accompany, strengthen, shield and embrace them forever. They’re still doing it.

We too enact a sacred drama by raising our palms to glorify the deity. “We believe in one God.” (Although lately we’ve realized the ironies of calling our God, “The Father Almighty;” no great scholars have come up with very strong arguments why God should be a ‘he’ or a ‘she,’ except in linguistics. But language development is, like political development, technological development, etc. of relentlessly dubious benefit to human society. The winners write the history, and they tend to spawn language. That ‘steadfast love’ Isaiah refers to, in the passage we heard translates a Hebrew word that comes from ‘mother’s womb,’ which at least proves they too struggled with Holy Gender. But I digress.

Of course there's a difference between us and those long-ago palm bearers. We let our sweet hosannas ring, well-knowing that those cries will turn into shouts of "Crucify him!" before the week is out. Imagine how Jesus must have felt, receiving the ecstatic reception of the people but knowing all the while how the week would progress. Symbolically, he doesn't make it all the way into Jerusalem. He doesn't ride all the way into the heart of his people's problem in triumph; it is humiliation that characterizes final days as a human fellow traveler. Our palm bearing today, and indeed our entire lives as Christians are aslant with the same kinds of paradox: self-forgetting in order to gain, forgiving in order to be forgiven, dying to attain life as subjects in a kingdom not of this world. Our triumphs are gained through humility.

The ethicist Margaret Farley observes: "...the shadow of Good Friday transforms the light of Palm Sunday, for only with them both together do we learn that dignity is sustained with integrity; that the forces of false judgment and suspicion, servile fear and violence, are to be named for what they are and resisted, even unto death. But they are not to be resisted by adopting the patterns of evil they represent. Through the death of Jesus, all death is overwhelmed; through the humiliations of Jesus, all humiliations can be transformed, not because of the death or the humiliation, but because of the love that was not broken." Such is the enduring love of which Isaiah speaks when he says, "But I trust in you, O Lord; I say, 'You are my God.' My times are in your hand. Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love."

God saves us by allowing – insisting – that we pay attention to the facts of what makes goodness grow. That we boast to have been made, "in the image and likeness of God," means we must continually be seeking godliness. We have the obligation to be co-creators with God and to empty ourselves of self-oriented

power. The animals, the plants, even the rocks can just go about their business of being weasels, rhododendron bushes or dolomite, but not us. Jesus came to show us our business. We all and always have choices in many matters – that’s our defining feature, our niftiest attribute and our biggest hassle: choosing. Our choices are ours and ours alone; it’s a lonely business. Imagine how lonely Jesus felt, deserted, abused and condemned.

What is our business? What does the life look like, what is the frame of reference, the point of view, the foundational attitude of such a life?

My daughter Lelia and I had the pleasure of spending a few days with my parents – her grandparents last week. They’re plenty old, but the joy of our relationships and mutual eagerness to engage in light dinner table conversation -- about good and evil, right and wrong, the nature of God – has yet to diminish. We will always be in conversation, even when their bodies have died. Coming back, we were socked in and missed our connection, so the long trip from the East Coast was made even longer. A friend had recommended the novelist David Mitchell, so I had a juicy book to listen to that lasted me the whole day and night. *Cloud Atlas*, it’s called, wherein Mitchell compellingly juxtaposes scenes of crisis and self-examination in a number of human societies whose contexts range across many centuries and into the future. The civilizations are as culturally disparate as, say us and the Hebrews of Biblical times, but the necessity of making moral choices, choosing spiritual and social responses to violence is all but identical.

Mitchell’s narrator concludes like this: “Why fight (against oppression, selfishness and injustice)? Because of this: One fine day, a purely predatory world will consume itself. Yes, the Devil shall take the hindmost, until the foremost is the

hindmost. In an individual, selfishness uglifies the soul. For the human species, selfishness is extinction. Is this the doom written within our nature?

“If we believe humanity may transcend tooth and claw, if we believe diverse races and creeds can share this world peaceably, if we believe leaders must be just, violence muzzled, power accountable, and the riches of the earth and its oceans shared equitably, such a world will come to pass. I am not deceived; it is the hardest of worlds to make real. Tortuous advances, won over generations, can be lost by a single stroke of a myopic president’s pen or a vainglorious general’s sword. But a life spent shaping a world I want my child to inherit, not one I fear my child might inherit, this strikes me as a life worth living.”

Such a life is a choice is offered to us as human beings. Such a choice is incumbent upon us as Christians.