

Make Sweet Hosannas Ring -- Palm Sunday C

“Make sweet hosannas ring,” we joyfully sing, echoing and reiterating the eager and giddy shouts of those people long ago and far away, whose excitement and hunger for good news welcomed Jesus on his dramatic, triumphant burro ride into Jerusalem. They lay palm branches in the roadway, in an exuberant, sacred gesture acknowledging the presence of royalty in their midst. At Succos, 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 were following instructions set out in the Book of Leviticus to bear palms on the feast day.

They were doing it 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 today.

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;” because nobody has ever come up with a good argument why God should be a ‘he’ or a ‘she,’ except in linguistics. But language development when it is without concomitant spiritual development is of relentlessly dubious benefit to human society, the same holds true for political, technological and every other kind of development. The victors of conflicts write the history, and they tend to spawn language that validates their victories. The ‘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.

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 hour 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, as indeed our entire lives as Christians is 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 The Passion transforms the light of Palm Sunday; for only with them both together do we learn that dignity is sustained with integrity in the face of suffering; 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 embue. Through the death and rising of Jesus, all death is overwhelmed; through the humiliation and redemption of Jesus, all humiliations can be transformed, not because of the death or the humiliation, but because of the love that was not broken in the midst of them." 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, not to say 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 in our personal lives. We have the obligation to be co-creators with God and to empty ourselves of self-oriented power. If there is power to be gained, it must only be for the sake of Creation as a whole, not for ourselves. Anyone who does otherwise is ungodly. The animals, the plants, even the rocks can just go about their business of being weasels, rhododendrons or dolomites, 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, and it can be a lonely business if we don’t seek counsel from others and follow a plan. Imagine how lonely Jesus felt: friendless, abused, condemned and killed.

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 children and I enjoy the pleasure of spending a few days with my parents – her grandparents. They are plenty old, and Mom’s faculties have failed her, but the joy of our relationships and mutual eagerness to engage in conversation -- about good and evil, right and wrong, the nature of God – persists. And we will always be in conversation, even when their bodies have died.

Coming back from a recent trip, we were socked in and missed our connection, so the long trip from the East Coast was made even longer. A friend 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 strikingly identical.

Mitchell's narrator concludes like this: "Why fight against greed, 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 means extinction." Is this doom written within our nature? I once pulled up to a stoplight behind a van with a license plate that read "Jesus #1." I'm not sure what the Levitical Code would have said about this in terms of graven images, but the effect was odd and unintentionally ironic because the van had a bumper sticker next to the license plate that read "America the Greatest." It wouldn't take an expert to note that, as the Romanian proverb has it, "*Cine aleargă după doi iepuri, nu prinde nici unul.*" He who runs after two rabbits will not catch one.

If we believe humanity may transcend tooth and claw, if we believe diverse races and creeds must share this world peaceably or perish, if we believe leaders must be just, violence muzzled, power accountable, and the riches of the earth and its oceans shared fairly, 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 our children to inherit, instead of one we fear our children might inherit, is a life worth living.

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