

## WHAT'S PASSION GOT TO DO WITH IT?

Sermon preached by K.C. Ptomey, Jr.

### Palm/Passion Sunday

April 5, 2009

Recently Larry King was interviewing one the most popular evangelists in the United States today. Now, as you know, Larry King is Jewish. Yet, his questions that night reflected a profound insight into the Christian faith. He asked his guest, "Yours is a Christian church isn't it?" "Oh, yes," answered the evangelist through a wide smile and gleaming white teeth. "Well," King continued, "I have never been to your church but I've watched your TV broadcast and I didn't see a cross anywhere. You have a huge stage with a large globe depicting the earth. But there's no cross in sight."

The evangelist's response was that his daddy who also had been a preacher didn't have a cross in his church either, just a large map of the world with pins indicating all the places the Gospel has spread.

Now I've got no idea if that evangelist or his father knows about the work of Philip Reif, a psychologist at the University of Chicago, but the architecture of that evangelist's church pays homage to Reif's point of view. Reif says, "Any church that keeps preaching on the cross is not going to grow... because in our culture what we're interested in is success, not sacrifice."<sup>[1]</sup>

When you think about it, for many Christians, Holy Week is without a cross because we skip most of Holy Week. Understandably. Maundy Thursday is a sad day of remembering the last supper of Jesus with his disciples. We end the service by stripping the chancel, a somber ritual. Good Friday is worse, bare church, sad music, darkness, the remembrance of Jesus' seven last words from the cross. No wonder so many Christians jump directly from Palm Sunday to Easter, leapfrogging right over all the unpleasantness.

Peter Gomes, Minister in the Memorial Chapel at Harvard says that we basically ignore the Passion, "saving the suffering for the faithful few, those moral masochists who will come to church on Maundy Thursday and on Good Friday..." He goes on to say that many churches do Palm Sunday without even a nod at the Passion story so that Palm Sunday becomes "a dress rehearsal for Easter."<sup>[2]</sup>

Annie Lamotte expresses the sentiment of many when she says,

I don't have the right personality for Good Friday, for the crucifixion. I'd like to skip ahead to the resurrection. In fact, I'd like to skip ahead to the

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<sup>[1]</sup> As quoted by Fred Craddock in a sermon in the series, "Sermons Preached at Cherry Log: The Epiphany Series, 1999, (Sermon 4)," Bell Tower Productions, Marietta, GA.

<sup>[2]</sup> Peter Gomes, *Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1998), p.69, as quoted by John Buchanan in a sermon at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, March 20, 2005, p.4.

resurrection vision of one of the kids in our Sunday School, who drew a picture of the Easter Bunny outside the tomb; everlasting life and a basketful of chocolates. Now you're talking.<sup>[3]</sup>

You don't even notice what you miss by skipping Maundy Thursday and Good Friday until a loved one is walking in the valley of the shadow of death; until you are going through a divorce, or a child falls desperately ill or a friend betrays you, or a spouse gets cancer, or you pay attention, really pay attention to what's going on in Zimbabwe or Darfur. You don't notice what you miss until the world seems or you personally feel God-forsaken. Then you need something more than an empty tomb and a basketful of chocolates. You need a God who more than anyone, even the one who is the very closest person to you in all this world, knows your pain, your loss, your heartache, your terror at seeing your own life ebbing away or worse, the life of a loved one in the grips of an illness about which the doctors can do nothing.

Over the years the theologians have tried to understand just why Jesus had to go through suffering and such an agonizing death. A view that has come to mean much to me is that Jesus suffered and died because he loved as God loves and to love as God does is to be vulnerable; to love as God does is to dare to enter into the pain and the heartache of the world.

Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation, understood divinity not so much in terms of sovereign omnipotence but astonishing compassion. Indeed, in German, the language Luther spoke, the word for "compassion" is *mitleid*, "with-suffering." To have compassion is to suffer with another, to be in solidarity with and to experience the highest possible degree of identity with another.<sup>[4]</sup>

Why include Jesus' suffering in the joyous festivities of Palm Sunday? Why are Maundy Thursday and Good Friday indispensable aspects of Holy Week? Why is it important to remember Jesus' suffering and death? Because in this world and in our lives there is suffering and death and to remember Jesus' Passion is to become aware anew that we are not alone. There is One who is with us, who shares our pain.

One of the old favorite Lenten hymns is the familiar "Jesus Walked this Lonesome Valley." The second stanza goes like this,

We must walk this lonesome valley,  
we have to walk it by ourselves.  
O, nobody else can walk it for us,

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<sup>[3]</sup> Annie Lamotte, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, (New York: Penguin Books Ltd., 2005), p.140, as quoted by Buchanan, *op.cit.*

<sup>[4]</sup> Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), p.22.

we have to walk it by ourselves.<sup>[5]</sup>

I know many of us love this old folk song so you will have to forgive me, but I think this is terrible theology. The good news of Maundy Thursday and the reason we call the day on which Jesus suffered and died, “Good” Friday, the good news is that we do not struggle and suffer and die alone. God is *mitleid*, God is a “with-suffering” God. When we hurt, God’s heart is the first to break.

Presbyterian theologian Bill Placher explains about as well as anyone the power of God’s empathy.

To know in the midst of the isolation that ... suffering often generate[s], that someone always understands is in itself to be significantly empowered to bear the pain...<sup>[6]</sup>

Today is Palm/Passion Sunday, a day to remember the glad crowds and festive mood as Jesus entered into the city among shouts of “hosanna” and the waving of palms. But this is also a day for celebrating the fact that for our sake Jesus didn’t skip Maundy Thursday or Good Friday; on Palm Sunday he went straight into the city, straight into the teeth of Thursday’s sad supper and Friday’s awful suffering.

Today we stand by the road and shout, “Hosanna,” thinking we are cheering him on to triumph *over* suffering. But the truth is he goes to triumph *through* suffering. And because he did we can be assured that so shall we. We do not walk this lonesome valley alone. Therefore, our suffering, our heartaches, our losses, our pain, and, indeed, the suffering of our world is not the last word. God’s love is the last word.

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<sup>[5]</sup> *The Presbyterian Hymnal*, #80.

<sup>[6]</sup> William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), p. 18.