



## *“Practicing Mission”*

Mark 14:10-15:47

Rev. Dr. David C. Fisher

**April 5, 2009**

Palm/Passion Sunday

I suspect few, if any, of us have experienced a Scripture Lesson as long as we heard today. The lesson is two chapters long, over 100 verses and lasts about twenty minutes.

Such a long lesson challenges modern attention spans. I divided it into four parts to help us pay attention – perhaps! In fact, the compilers of the lectionary offer a shortened version of the Passion narrative for impatient pastors and congregations. The character of the lesson challenges American Christianity’s demand for “upbeat” worship services filled with helpful “take home” advice. Suffering, death and what appears to be a failed mission don’t appeal to most folks these days.

But an ancient wisdom suggests we need to hear today’s lesson – all of it. These days, most church people skip from the palms and shouts of hosanna on Palm Sunday straight to Easter’s trumpets and cries of alleluia. What happens in between is, it seems, an inconvenient truth.

Yet both the palms and Easter morning find their meaning and power in what happens in between – what the church calls the Passion of Jesus. And oddly, the entire Passion story is seldom heard in many churches.

Except in a growing number of churches that celebrate Palm Sunday as Palm/Passion Sunday. It’s an ancient custom being restored to its rightful place in the church. It’s a good tradition. This is a story that needs to be heard.

A careful look at the four gospels indicates that the last week of Jesus’ life takes up a large part of the story of Jesus. In Mark, for example, the narrative of that last week of Jesus’ life takes up forty per cent of Mark’s gospel. The gospel writers are, as it were, waving a red flag and crying, “Pay attention.” There is something going on here that is central to the Christian story.

It is safe to say that the Passion story, particularly Good Friday and Easter morning, formed the early Christian movement. It was the central piece of the Christian faith and preaching. They believed – and the historic church teaches – that the cross and resurrection, taken together as they must be, comprise the saving event by which God redeems the world.

The earliest Christian confession of faith is simply this: “Jesus died for our sins, according to the scriptures, was buried and rose again on the third day, according to the scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

The passion of Jesus is the heart of the Christian good news. Properly understood, Good Friday and Easter are the motivation for the Christian mission in the world and the source of the Christian ethic.

**Plymouth Church**  
**Sermon 5 April 09**

Then and now, the old story bears formative power – it “does” something in the hearing that we believe is the power of God at work in the world. It is a message that demands proclamation.

On Palm/Passion Sunday, Christian preachers must take care not to get in the way of the story. Instead, our task is to take the story on its terms, not ours, and to assist it as it does its work, not ours. That is what I want to do – briefly.

I want you to take note that while the reading is lengthy, it is also straightforward, compact, and rather matter of fact. What is interesting is that while Mark and the other gospel writers obviously think the story of Jesus’ passion is the main point of the gospel, none of them takes the opportunity to interpret the story – they simply tell it.

Unlike most retellings of the story, Mark and the others do not furnish many details. In particular, they say nothing of the brutality of the crucifixion, nor do they speak of the anguish of Jesus on the cross. There is not a word about Jesus’ suffering, no mention of blood, no pounding of the nails, no screams of pain, no description of the wounds.

The gospel writers don’t seem interested in manipulating emotions or making the reader feel bad. To put it another way, the gospel writers would be dumbfounded by Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of Jesus*. They are not interested in the blood and gore of the cross. Their point is the fact of the cross, not all the details supplied by Christian preachers and artists through the centuries.

It seems to me worthwhile to take the story seriously since the gospel writers do, but to take the story on their terms. After all they are the writers!

Mark speaks for the rest when he says simply, directly and with wonderful compression of language, “and they crucified him.”

Early in the morning on the day we dare call Good Friday, the narrative takes a sudden and dramatic shift. For the first time in the story, Jesus is acted upon, not acting. He’s not forcing the action and clearly not in control. On the cross he says very little. In Mark a simple sentence, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.” Up to this point in the story, Jesus constantly preaches and teaches. But not now. Silently, the man from Galilee hangs on a cross. “And they crucified him.”

And yet, according to the story, Jesus’ life pointed in the direction of the cross. It is the heart of the story and the center of God’s good news revealed in Jesus. The early Christian movement proclaimed that the cross is the power of God, the wisdom of God, and the hope of the world. Apparently, and in a way baffling to human wisdom, this is what Jesus came to do.

You heard the story. The cheers and palms of Sunday morning were cries of anger by Monday afternoon when Jesus threw the money-changers out of the Temple – and likely provoked the Temple establishment. The story begins to take the shape of a cross.

Thursday night, Jesus shared the Last Supper with his disciples. It was a Passover meal, a sacred and ancient meal that Jesus transformed into a Christian sacrament – a new kind of ancient and sacred meal shaped in the form of the cross.

He took bread and then wine, shared them with his disciples, and said, “This bread is my body given for you. This wine is the new covenant written in blood. Eat. Drink.” He poured out his life for the sake of the world.

After dinner in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus came face to face with his destiny. Mark pulls no punches. Jesus was “distressed and agitated.” “I am deeply grieved,” he told the disciples. He begged God, “Take this cup from me.” That cup was the cup of suffering and he drank that bitter cup – all of it, for us and for the world. There is no escaping the cruciform shape of Jesus’ life and the Christian gospel.

“And they crucified him.” From the beginning, the church believed and teaches that Good Friday and Easter morning are the central revelation of God. They are inseparable parts of God’s self-disclosure. The entire Passion is what God wants us to know about himself.

On the cross Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,” Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that we need a God who knows something about suffering and abandonment. We need a God who enters into the darkness and death of the world in order to redeem it. In Jesus’ passion God shares with us the bitterness, darkness, suffering, and reversals of our lives and of the world. God takes all the sin and suffering of the world into his own great heart in order to save the world – and us in it.

God is no detached, unmoved mover off somewhere in a corner of the universe. The God revealed in the passion of Jesus is a passionate, suffering God whose heart is broken by all that breaks our hearts.

And lying at the center of the story is what we need more than anything else: forgiveness and reconciliation. God redeems death and darkness, sin and suffering by entering into it, absorbing it, and standing with us through it all. God comes to us to make peace, to re-establish a lost relationship, to forgive us, and to welcome us home.

That is the Christian message and that is what the world needs. What is more needed these days than forgiveness and reconciliation? What would the world be like if Israel and the Palestinians forgave and reconciled? Serbs and Croats, Sunnis and Shia, Tutsis and Hutus need to reconcile and forgive - to name a few.

Closer to home, what if forgiveness and reconciliation took root in our land? What if races, classes, political leaders, Wall Street and Main Street, north and south, east and west, families and congregations began to forgive and longed to reconcile? What do you suppose that would be like?

The message of the cross, properly understood, saves all who believe – but it is a story larger than us. The cross means entering into the pain and suffering of another for the sake of reconciliation and redemption. And that means us. The cross means sharing God’s heart and God’s vision of the world, having our hearts broken by what breaks God’s heart. The cross means being propelled out into God’s mission on earth which always requires sacrificial suffering on behalf of others.

We live in a world that seems too much like the darkness, death and suffering of Good Friday. The church exists to live in just such a world on behalf of the world. Our message and our mission are not bound in the darkness of the cross. Friday is not the last word. We live and proclaim a message of profound hope. As African-American preachers are fond of saying on Good Friday, it might be Good Friday, but Sunday’s coming!

Amen.