

## Lent VI (Palm Sunday)

There is not normally time for a sermon on Palm Sunday, because the complete Passion (to say nothing of the ceremonies of the day) is so long. And in a sense if the Passion will not speak for itself, what can the preacher do to remedy this?

Yet there is an Epistle as well as the Passion to consider. This passage from Paul has been bitterly contested, as to what degree of self-emptying is meant. I must warn that those who contest for precision may be forcing the words to do more than Paul's knowledge of Greek could achieve; and they are certainly at risk of losing the moral message. For us sinners, the message we must first receive from Paul is the call to humility. This is what Christ has been through for us; this is the mind which must be in us.

But the Epistle (or the Good News) does not end in the death on the cross, and we are false to the Passion if in our minds that is the ending. Far from it; if the only way in is the door of humility, the end is exaltation. Not the feeble and temporary exaltation of the crowd at the entry into Jerusalem, which we nevertheless rightly recall on this day. But Paul's cry of hope, that "every knee should bow" (willingly or not, and to much better purpose than the recent fad for "taking the knee") and "every tongue" will be brought to "confess that Jesus Christ is Lord". Christ is Lord, so the devil and all the hostile powers have had to admit ultimate defeat. Christ is Lord, and the atheists and unbelievers will come to know it.

If we are to keep Passiontide well, we do not mourn for the dead Jesus. Or certainly not that alone. We do indeed follow him in his obedience on the way of death. But always as knowing that the death is not the end.

Indeed in early Christian thought the death itself is a triumph, for Sin and Death found out the hard way that their apparent triumph over Jesus was fatal to them; in dying and descending into Hell (the place of the dead, Hades, is the term used on the earliest version of the Apostles' Creed) he broke their power. In the iconography of the Orthodox, we see broken gates and smashed locks, as Christ leads out from Hades a long procession of dead saints of the Old Covenant, to lead them to Paradise.

There is a death, and we do well not to evade its details. This is what obedience meant for Christ "even unto death, death on the cross". I am not convinced that we need to spend too much time on why it had to be so. Various reasons have been expressed in the Church. One idea from Paul is found in a feature of Passover; there must be an end of the "old leaven" and a complete break before there can be a new beginning with "the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth". Christ is himself both the end (climax and conclusion) of the Old Covenant, though sacrifices and temple lingered for nearly another forty years, and the One who inaugurates the New Covenant (in his Blood at the Eucharist). The perfect offering is also final; yet it establishes the new relationship once and for all, which is why Hebrews emphasises Christ sitting down in heaven.

But I have not reached the end of the Epistle as set in the Prayer Book, or in the logic of Paul's writing. (Paul did not know of punctuation or paragraphs as we now write, but we can judge how Paul expected to be recited when his letter was read to the faithful in Church.) He reaches a conclusion in "to the glory of God the Father". Christ does not go through his Passion for any self-regarding reason, but in obedience to the eternal purpose of the Father to rescue us. There is no division of will in the Holy Trinity. Christ does not have to persuade his Father to love us.

He is "highly exalted"; and he will draw us after him. He has prepared a place for us, and the work is complete in him, though not in us.