

Maundy Thursday Reflections:

This is the middle of Holy Week, but for many it is merely a recess between celebrations. These few days are considered a sidelight or footnote. Most Christians concentrate on the days of jubilation. People are in church on Palm Sunday to get their palms. It is an opportunity to cheer and root as the crowds did on that original entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. We praise God with the multitudes.

By the end of Palm Sunday we begin to anticipate the next parade. There are Easter baskets, family gatherings and the revelry of resurrection. It is a great feeling to celebrate the power of God over death. We are exuberant over the Lord's resurrection from the grave. Palm Sunday and Easter: times of joy. What about in-between? There is some somber music, some dramatic Good Friday sermons. There is an attempt to be solemn, but it is often half-hearted. For we know the outcome; we have read the last chapter. And it is hard to be sorrowful when we anticipate the happy ending. We go through the motions of sadness, but are caught up in the party atmosphere of Easter.

I believe we are afraid to face the truths that underlie the happenings in the upper room and on the cross. The crucifixion tells us something about human nature. There are dark and evil forces that sometimes take control of the best of us. And there is a pressure from peers that is often overwhelming. It is not something we like to face. There is still a mob mentality. We have not come to grips with our prejudices and narrow-mindedness. The cross is echoed in our injustices and inhumanity. There is still so much pain and suffering that we experience, that we condone, that we cause. We retain the capacity for ugliness and sin. We continue to heed the wrong voices, to ignore the signs of God's presence, to confuse the will of God with the demands of society.

We also overlook the central issue of the last supper. Jesus issued a command on that evening. "Love one another as I have loved you." He didn't say just "Love one another." That would have been bland, trite, innocuous. That is nothing radical, nothing new, nothing befitting a man who riled the rulers. That challenge would not have people asking "Who is this guy?"

“Love one another as I have loved you.” That is a challenge. Jesus had compassion for all sorts of people, many who were despised and disliked by most sane and selective people. Jesus befriended those that discerning people shunned. Jesus showed a reckless disregard for the common standards for choosing love objects. Are we so willing to embrace the outcast, to care for the coarse and common? Jesus says to love the losers—the contrarians, the irritating, the annoying, the grumpy, the critical. Love even our enemies—the ones who push our buttons. Jesus is asking too much.

The love of Jesus was sacrificial. It called on the lover to be a servant, selfless, giving up position to serve the undeserving. The Lord calls for sacrifice of what is legitimately ours. If we took Jesus seriously we would have to sacrifice security and disregard costs. We would have to take some risks with some suspicious people. It would mean loving in spite of betrayal, desertion and disbelief.

Palm Sunday and Easter are happy days because we are on the sidelines. Nothing is asked of us except our unrestrained celebrations. But today and tomorrow are not our favorite holidays, because we are involved, vicariously and actively, in the events. We are co-conspirators, guilty of complicity in the evil of Good Friday. We are culpable in the crucifixion. And Maundy Thursday demands an attitude that is alien to all of us. Our Lord calls us to a level of love that tests our tolerance. We must love in ways that are discomfiting and disagreeable, inconvenient and impractical. Today and tomorrow call on us to change, and that is not nearly as much fun as the cheering on Palm Sunday and Easter. Go on, celebrate! But remember that you have to do more if you want to join in the resurrection.

~Pastor Kelly