

Palm Sunday Year C

Luke 19:28-40; Isaiah 53:4-9; Phil 2:5-11

“Running Down a Dream”

We live between what is – the reality of things as they are; and what we expect things to be – the expression of our desire for things as we wish them to be. We live between our present situation, for better or worse, and the promises of the future, most often perceived in the best possible light available to us. We live between life and death. We exist between this very moment and whatever our past has turned us into. The future is always what we hope for or what we fear the most.

As Christians, I think we often fool ourselves into thinking we understand what is going on in our spiritual lives. We create vast doctrines, creeds and conflicting tribal group understandings of the nature of God and who Jesus is. As someone once said, “*There are now 38,000 Christian denominations in the world. Aren’t you glad you are in the right one?*” Such a fractured situation provides great fodder for those who would deny the entire Christian enterprise, and who can blame them? It is almost always easier to stand on the sidelines and watch the processing crowd rather than agree to what one doesn’t understand. And sometimes, it is worse to participate in things one does not fully understand.

Take our disciples today. Just before this scene entering Jerusalem, Jesus has told the twelve disciples what is going to happen.

*And taking the twelve, he said to them, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise.” (Luke 18:31-33) .*

Then listen to what Luke says about what the disciples have just heard.

*But they understood none of these things. This saying was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said. (Luke 18:34)*

Today, our journey of deepening awareness of our life in Christ that began with the Transfiguration pauses as we continue the process of distillation we encountered last week. We have come through our recognition of our darkness, our confrontation with that darkness in the desert, the reliance on God’s covenant and commitment to us with Abraham, a releasing of our past into the embrace of the Father, and the distillation that we are now figuring out how best to serve God and Christ. If we have come to any awareness at all over the last several weeks, I hope it is that our inherent worth, our personal value, our dignity as human beings is a gift from God, a gift which we continually gain a deeper awareness as we deepen our faith life in Christ. It is this awareness and understanding which makes us disciples of Christ. And it is with them, the multitude of disciples, we stand with outside the gates of Jerusalem today.

They are an unruly bunch. It actually looks pretty bad, like some great practical joke. Sinners, tax collectors, the lame, the sick, the recently healed, publicans, betrayers, embezzlers, former prisoners, future prisoners, illiterate fisherman, questionable women, questionable men. A dance of fools, a parade of rejects, an onslaught of mediocrity and shame. What could they possibly see in a person, this Jesus, who attracts these people?

Who would be in that crowd today? We can best answer that question in today's world by finding out who is being yelled about the loudest today, who is the target today. This is not dependent on what side of the political fence you are on; it simply would be all the people we hold in the harshest judgment.

Imagine then, if you will, this crowd today: I see a crowd of homeless people who have slept in their cars with their families, who have slept under the bridge or along the sea by the rocks or in an entryway to a building. I see the woman with cancer and two children who was unlawfully evicted by her landlord in the winter. I see, perhaps, scandal-ridden movie stars communing with fallen senators who formerly proclaimed family values. I see broke CEOs who stole money from their employees walking side-by-side with the struggling heroin addict, who, no matter how many times he tries, just can't kick the habit. I see single mothers, the broken and depressed, the AIDs sufferer, the social hi-flyer and the crashing and burning family man. I see the minister who, through a series of bad decisions, has destroyed a large church. People who made things look good while the foundations of their lives were eroded underneath them. Depressed, rejected, broken, hidden. It is a huge mess.

Whether then or now, someone watching this parade of dysfunction, someone at the edge of the crowd will step up and say to the leader of the less-than-respectable group, *"Will you, for the love of God and all that is holy, do something about these people? If the authorities come down here, I can't be associated with this group. Besides, aren't you doing this to free us from the very authorities you are going to bring down on our heads by doing this? How in the world are you going to achieve anything with...with...these people?"*

And all around this call for respectability, for some kind of order and discipline, for some sort of decorum, the people look to Jesus and cry,

*"Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace on heaven and glory in the highest!"*

This unruly crowd seems to know something about the true nature of Jesus' work on earth. For this crowd of disciples, peace is the order of heaven; glory is in the heights of the realms of angels and God's heavenly council.

What we see in Jesus' way with his disciples and with everyone he relates to is the restoration of dignity and promise to people who have never had it before. This is why the multitude of disciples lay their garments on the ground before Jesus. The people give over the only thing they have – the clothes on their back. They give over what they

value the most to the dignity of Jesus, the very dignity and acknowledgment he has given them. They praise and attest to the source of who they are in the eyes of God.

Looking backward from the Cross, this is the dignity and acknowledgment God has conferred upon Jesus. Philippians 2:5-11 is recognized as probably one of, if not the, oldest hymn in the Christian faith, though scholars debate whether it is a hymn or not. Paul's letters predate the Gospels. If the Gospel of Mark is the earliest Gospel, it was written in about 70 AD or so. Paul's letters are before that, but after 33 AD. Philippians is considered to be the earliest of Paul's letters for various reasons and its writing is considered to be around 61 AD. My point in telling you this is because Philippians 2:5-11 is a full-blown theological statement about the nature of Jesus and the attribution of sharing in the essence and nature of God. It is a statement which conveys people's understanding of who Jesus was relatively soon after his death and resurrection. This is a profound understanding of the nature of God and Christ within 30 years of his death. Since it is expressed in an early letter, it would be considered 'common' knowledge among the first churches.

Listen again to PHIL 2:9-11.

*Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:9-11)*

Jesus rides his donkey through the middle of the messy experience of these gathered people and their dreams for the future. He rides through the middle of the strange, rag-tag crowd on the one side and the fear of the authorities on the other side. The *promise of the future* and the *actuality of what is here and is to come* part, just as the waters of the Jordan parted for the people of God in the Exodus from Egypt. Through the middle of the parted ocean of human experience comes the dignified Man-God, the lowly God-Man, Jesus Christ.

*Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:9-11)*

Do you hear it? The divinity, the essential quality of God, has been given over to Jesus. The Father has granted the Son the fullness of the inheritance in such a way that we need never wonder about the divinity of Jesus Christ. It is the dignity of God which Jesus Christ shares with those who have been created in the image of God, with you and I, with the multitude of disciples. This restoration of dignity which Jesus confers upon the messy crowd following him into Jerusalem is such a powerful recognition that the people cannot stay quiet about it. The threats of death and imprisonment and cultural destruction which lurk in the authority of state and religion alike are meaningless compared to the dignity of God which the people express today.

If these people were quiet about what Jesus has conferred upon them, the stones themselves would cry out; creation itself would speak on their behalf, because Jesus has already spoken on their behalf.

*Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:9-11)*

What does it mean to have our dignity restored in Christ? Dignity, in our modern age, is a thing we think intrinsic to a person. It is automatic. But if this is true, why are there so many examples of the undignified treatment of others, whether in corporations, in warfare, in government, in churches, in business, in relationships, in cultures against cultures, in religions, in so many of our interactions? It is because we actually believe, in the modern age, that dignity must first be conferred before it is recognized and acted upon.

Think on these things. Think about who you judge harshly. Are they in this rag-tag group following Jesus into Jerusalem? Think about those who react to the cries of those people who seek their dignity, those who find their dignity in the one whom God has placed God's own dignity and divinity. Do you stand with the rag-tag crowd, or do you stand with the Pharisees who fear the outcome of such a profound declaration?

When we see and acknowledge the dignity of another, we are seeing the glow of the light of God within another. We get a glimpse of the greater dream God has for us. We become a participant, like the crowd today, in a larger dream for all of Creation than when we personally desire for ourselves. Now, at the entrance to the gates of the Great City, at this point in our journey from the Transfiguration to the Cross and beyond, we see that, even though we may have personal goals and dreams, the Lord will take them up and in and transform them in the light of God's greater dream for us. We lay down those things of greatest value in the path of Christ, trusting that his journey will be ours as well. We do this because we know the source of our dignity, of who we are and whose we are.

As Jesus rides his colt through the gates of Jerusalem. The people carry on in such an undignified fashion. As the powers that be react, do not jump ahead to what you already know of the story. Do not skip ahead to Jesus' death on the Cross for the sake of the promise of Easter. Stay here for a moment, at the edge of the city, celebrating your participation in the shared dream of God's greater dream for us. We must take the time to journey beyond this moment through the confusion, the hiddenness, the pain and horror of rejection, betrayal, death. Our dignity is dependent upon it.

As we stand in between all the confusions of our lives, as we stand between what we claim and what we reject, as we stand between life and death, let us, on this day,

celebrate what we do know: through this man who rides between all these things, we reclaim our dignity as human beings, and it is through this one who God confers all that is God's that we can once again recognize who we were meant to be before we left the Garden. Here, in the grand parade of humanity, we confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Blessed indeed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.