

Sermon: A World in Need of Healing

4/5/2020

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

When Jesus appeared before Pilate on Good Friday, in just a few days time, Israel had long been awaiting the return of the “King of the Jews.” Now, most Jews were convinced that their long-awaited king would free them from Roman rule, removing any doubt that they were God’s chosen people and that the Promised Land had been given to them by God. The “King of the Jews” was supposed to be like Saul, David, and Solomon, kings whom God had chosen to rule over Israel with the Spirit and the sword. In other words, he was supposed to be like the kings who had ruled over them for centuries and was supposed to return Israel to its prior glory. He was not supposed to be like Jesus. I mean, what king calls on their followers to put down the sword and turn the other cheek, or to “give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s”? No, the king that the Jews were expecting was a lot like the man who paraded into Jerusalem so long ago, on the day we now celebrate as Palm Sunday. Their king was supposed to be a lot like Pilate.

Jesus and Pilate were in Jerusalem for the same reason: Passover, the week-long festival that we’ve talked about on recent Sunday. Passover was a time during which Jews from across the Mediterranean would gather together to give thanks to God for their deliverance from slavery and seek forgiveness for their sins. During this week emotions often ran high, with those less fortunate, those who benefited least from Roman rule, making frequent calls for revolution. It was the job of Pilate, the governor of Judea, to keep the peace. Primarily, he did so by making the sixty-mile journey from his seaside estate in Caesarea to Jerusalem. Each year, Pilate would arrive at the beginning of Passover surrounded by thousands of chariots, cavalry, and foot

soldiers, all of whom were dressed and armed for battle for all the Jews to see. Pilate entered the front gate with this show of force to remind the Jews that his and Rome's authority were not to be questioned; that he and Rome must be treated with awe and fear, and with obedience and respect. It was a reminder that the Jews already had a king, and that their king was not this so-called "King of the Jews."

What Pilate did not realize as he entered Jerusalem that day was that there was another procession entering the city from another gate. A triumphal entry designed to rival Pilate's. When Jesus entered into Jerusalem, as we heard in today's Gospel lesson, he was not riding on a horse or in a chariot, or surrounded by soldiers and weapons. He was riding a colt, as the prophet Zachariah had prophesied centuries before. "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem," we hear Zachariah declare, "your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey; on a colt, the foal of a donkey." Jesus and the disciples knew Zechariah and they knew the prophecy, as did those who were watching Jesus enter Jerusalem. And yet, in defiance of Pilate, those watching stood in the street waving palm branches and shouting: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven!" This was dangerous language. It was inflammatory. It was treason. And according to the Pharisees and chief priests, as we'll hear most noticeably on Good Friday, it had to be stopped.

Now, you might think that, since Rome's religion was in direct conflict with Judaism, the Pharisees and chief priests would have welcomed Jesus; that they would have been seeking and celebrated the return of their long-awaited king. The reality, though, was that the Temple and all those who served it were not so desperate for change. After centuries of foreign domination, destruction, and despair, Jews were allowed to freely practice their faith so long as they

maintained Roman order and paid their tribute to Rome. The reason for this was that Judaism was considered an “ancient religion,” affording Jews a degree of religious freedom not enjoyed by most other conquered territories. Yes, many Jews admitted, life under Roman rule was not perfect. Then again, what better alternative was there? The Pharisees and chief priests were being asked by Jesus to follow a king who had disciples rather than an army, and testified to the truth rather than with the sword. Why should they risk everything for such an unexpected king?

The answer being that, while Christ may not have been the king that they expected, he was the king that they needed. Christ realized that the time had come for a new covenant. One in which God’s love and grace would be extended to every nation, race, and kingdom. Christ had been sent to establish and rule over a kingdom that would be governed by truth rather than partisan agendas and by a king guided by love and respect rather than fear and power. Embracing this king would have required that the Jews, most notably the Pharisees and chief priests, be willing to sacrifice everything—their wealth, their status, their safety, and their expectations. Now, I want to be clear: the Jews who rejected Jesus that day were not bad people. They were loving parents and loyal citizens, faithful spouses and devoted children, they were people who were active in their communities and seeking to follow God the best they knew how. They were people who had witnessed just how broken this world is and had accepted that no matter how hard they try there was nothing they could do about it. In other words, they were people a lot like you and me.

If the past year has taught us anything, it’s that we still live in a broken world. We live in a world that remains in desperate need of healing. Healing that seems as far away as ever. Over the past 12 months, more than 30 million Americans have contracted the coronavirus and over 545,000 have died. And that’s just the numbers from the United States. We’ve also seen and

heard numerous accounts of people being verbally abused and physically attacked all because they did a simple thing like ask another person to wear a mask. Where has our love for our neighbor gone? Why does this world remain so broken? It's gotten to the point where I now expect that the pain and suffering I see all around me will just be twisted and used to advance personal and partisan agendas. What, I can't help but wonder, will it honestly take for us to realize that something needs to change? That our world is broken and in need of healing, and that we Christians have played a role in such brokenness? We as Christians like to think of ourselves as a city on a hill, pointing all those around us to the way, the truth, and the light. But the reality, if we're truly being honest, is that we're not so different than the Jews who welcomed Pilate into Jerusalem that day and would go on to shout for Jesus to be crucified just a few days later.

All-too-often, we too choose to go along with the crowd. We allow for suffering and injustice to continue without raising a word because we doubt that we can make a difference, and fear what will happen if try. In the last two weeks, we've witnessed two more mass shootings in our nation, our sixth and seventh of this year alone. On those fateful days, 18 people tragically died, and yet, in all likelihood, their deaths won't lead to any real change. As Christians, we should be seeking to heal such brokenness. We should be striving each day to help make this world into a place where such death and destruction need never happen again. We should be trying to bring a little bit more of God's kingdom down here to the earth. But are we honestly striving to do so? Just preaching on this subject, I must admit, makes me extremely uncomfortable. It makes me want to just go along with the crowd and not call out such violence, to not declare that these deaths are against God's will and that we as Christians cannot stand idly by, because I fear what will happen if I do. But what will happen to me if I don't try, if I just go along with crowd yet again?

Right now, people in our nation and all across the world are dying from disease and gun violence, families are being torn apart because of ideological differences, and more and more men, women, and children are living on the streets because they can't find the means to support themselves and their families. These are the type of moments that define who we are and to whom we belong. As Christians, we have been called to welcome the stranger, to heal the sick, and to care for the outcast and the downtrodden, and not just when it's easy or convenient. We've been called to do this each and every day of our lives, so that through us God might bring healing to this world. Healing which depends upon us being willing to step out from the crowd, pledge our allegiance to our one true King, Jesus Christ, the "King of the Jews," and follow him wherever he may lead us. May we each, in the coming weeks and years, and indeed every day of our lives, take up our cross and follow him, follow him with all our heart, all our mind, and all our strength. Amen.