

The Palms and The Passion

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(Matthew 21:1-11; Matthew 26:17-30; Matthew 27:1-54)

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A common thread runs through all the Scripture lessons for today, the day of the Palms and the day of the Passion of our Lord. There is a dual theme of servant hood and glory, and to the casual observer one might wonder what one has to do with the other. Yet if the dual themes of glory and servant-hood are separated or pitted against each another, the entire mystery of the Passion, and in turn, the mystery of our life in Christ, will be thrown hopelessly off kilter.

The Passion of Jesus carries within it this dual reality, which is often split apart by various segments of the Church. We hear ourselves debating *a theology of the cross* versus *a theology of glory*, as if one is forced to proclaim either Christ's cross or God's glory. Either side of the mystery of Christ's passion, if separated from the other will result in misrepresentation or abuse.

One side proclaims that Christ's passion and therefore life in Christ is about humble servant-hood. The Cross of Christ is a servant's burden. We are Christ's servants as Christ is the servant of God. All this is true, however, our servant-hood needs to be balanced by a healthy dose of glory, a joyous realization that Christ has won the ultimate victory over our sins, death and the devil, thus freeing us for service in His name. Without this, servant-hood can degenerate into self flagellation and false modesty. A skewed notion of servant-hood will lead us to believe that God loves us because we suffer and grovel.

The other side of Passion is that of glory. The cross of Christ we know that we are the heirs of salvation and heralds of that salvation to the world. All this is true, however, when we focus solely on the glory of Christ's passion and the victory of the cross without a healthy dose of servitude, we will degenerate into self-congratulations and false pride.

The two sides of the Passion and therefore the two sides of life in Christ are to be held in balance. When we have a balanced understanding of the meaning of the Passion, there will be no need to choose between servant-hood and glory, between social ministry and evangelism, between action and adoration. Holding on to the dual mystery of the passion is our key to maintaining a balanced and faithful life in Christ.

The dual mystery of the Passion is proclaimed boldly in Philippians 2:6-11: *Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of a man. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God, has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, 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.* In this text, Jesus being in the form of God, took on the form of a servant. Let us view our hymn not only as a description of the dual reality of Christ's passion, but as a description of our calling as Christians in the mystery of our faith. This dual reality is one of humanity and yet divinity; it is

of servant-hood and yet glory. It is a loaf which is a body broken and yet is the bread of heaven; it is blood that is spilled that is yet a cup of salvation.

Today we celebrate the glory of the hallelujahs and the parade that ended in tears, call it Palm Sunday, or call it the Sunday of our Lord's Passion, let us remind ourselves that the we are in the image of God, we will not count equality with God a thing that we should grasp. Instead, let us empty ourselves and take the form of Christ's servants. Let us humble ourselves and be obedient bearers of the cross. We can do these things because God has highly exalted us in our baptism and has bestowed upon each of us the name which is above all other names, the name of Christ, that calls all of us to bow our knees, and all our tongues to confess that Jesus is the Lord, always and forever to the glory of God the Father.

As Christians, we have no doubt about the two natures of our Saviour. He was the God-man. He humbled himself so low, in order to represent us before the Father and by his perfect obedience (even unto the death on a cross) earn for us not only forgiveness but a sharing in His divinity, through his being our brother but also the Son of God. The words of this hymn from the early Christian community which Paul quotes, are for us today a consolation and an encouragement.

Every Christian must be consoled by the thought of God's infinite love for them as shown in the Incarnation. We are not dealing with some distant, cold, legal God of justice, who spends his time marking up our sins and failure. We are dealing with a loving Father who sent his own beloved Son to live among us and die for us in order to bring home to us the great greatness of divine love. Could any human mind, even the minds of the greatest of this world's philosophers, have invented such a humanly incredible story of true love? No, it was only in the infinite mind of God that such proof of love could have had its source.

What encouragement this should give every Christian. We know we are weak. We can and do sin. We know we are mean and ungrateful and that we seldom stop to thank God for the love he has shown us. If we are dealing with a human, narrow-visioned God, we should have reason to despair, but when our Judge is the all loving, all merciful God, how can even the worst sinner ever lose hope?

There is no place for despair in the Christian faith, but there is room for gratitude and confidence. We can never thank God sufficiently for all He has done for us. Eternity itself will not be long enough for this, but we must do the little we can. Let us face this coming Holy Week with hearts filled with thanks to God and to his divine Son for all they have done for us. When meditating on the Passion of Christ on Good Friday, let us look with gratitude and confidence on the Son of God who died on a cross in order to earn eternal life for us.

He did not die to lose me or you, but to save us, He has done 99% of the work for our salvation. Regarding the remaining 1%, He asks us to do, He is with us helping us to do it. Could any be so foolish as to refuse the little He asks of us? Amen.