



SERMONS THAT WORK

Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday Year B

Sacrifice

[RCL]: Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Mark 14:1-15:47

How did this happen? How did Jesus' life of peace end in such a violent death? We stand at the edge of this moment, looking on in horror and confusion — just as Jesus' followers did on the day he was crucified. The violence we have seen is numbing: it robs us of the ability to think clearly. Like Peter in Pilate's courtyard, we are afraid. And fear will always lead us astray. So it's a difficult moment to try and puzzle out the meaning of what happened here.

The familiar formula — that Jesus died for our sins — raises more questions than it answers. First, exactly how is Jesus' death connected with our forgiveness? Why does this terrible thing lead to that wonderful thing? And who is it that wants this sacrifice anyway?

Some are content to say that God does. But surely God cannot *need* such a sacrifice. Consider what the prophets have to say about the offerings and sacrifices made in the temple. In Isaiah, God says, "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? I have had enough of burnt offerings... I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats." And in Hosea: "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." And on Ash Wednesday, we began Lent by reciting this line from Psalm 51: "The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."

Throughout his ministry, Jesus questioned the authority the temple claimed as the sole arbiter of God's grace. Every time he broke one of the rules by healing on the Sabbath or eating with someone considered unclean, he was saying that God's love embraces everyone. No one controls access to God's grace. God's love is bigger than you think it is.

But if God did not desire Jesus' death in this way, then who did? Why did this happen?

To answer that question, we have to fill in some of the story that's missing from the Palm Sunday liturgy. We began this morning by waving our palm branches in the air, celebrating Jesus' "Triumphal Entry" into Jerusalem. Jesus and his disciples have come from the countryside, where his ministry began, to celebrate Passover in the ancient city. Jesus knew the crowds would be there — he wanted to bring his message to as many people as possible, and to confront the religious authorities in the temple head on.

Mark's timeline for the whole week of Passover is surprisingly precise. Because of this, we can work out that Jesus would have entered Jerusalem on the Sunday before Passover. The Palm Sunday liturgy then

skips over several days of that Passover week, and several chapters of Mark's Gospel, and the next thing we know, it is Thursday evening. Jesus' disciples are preparing the Passover meal, as Mark says, "on the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed." But it's what happens between Sunday and Thursday that helps explain why the authorities — both Jewish and Roman — were so keen to have Jesus killed.

Let's fill in some of the missing pieces. First of all, Jesus' so-called triumphal entry: although the crowds shouted Hosanna to greet him, it seems perfectly obvious that Jesus' procession was anything but triumphant. He chose to ride into town on a young colt, the foal of a donkey. If this is hard for you to picture, imagine a large and friendly dog, about three feet tall at the shoulder. Jesus has no armor but the cloaks of peasants, and he is lauded with palm branches and leaves instead of golden eagles on spears carried in procession by Roman soldiers.

You see, it was Rome that really loved a procession. Rome excelled at using a military parade as a demonstration of its dominance, to keep its subjugated peasants in awe. And Jesus knew that Pilate, the Roman Governor, made a point of riding from his capital city on the Mediterranean coast every Passover, to make sure these crowds of peasants in Jerusalem stayed in line. Picture Pilate on a magnificent war horse and surrounded by a legion of Roman soldiers in red and gold armor, marching in lockstep as they enter the city gates.

Jesus' little street parade, in contrast, with the donkey and the palm fronds, is an anti-imperial protest. He's mocking the empty pomp of the empire, questioning the brutality with which Rome ruled the peasant class and kept Judea impoverished.

After taking on the empire, Jesus goes straight to the temple. The day after that peace demonstration, Jesus takes over the temple courtyard, the heart of the action during Passover week, and stages a teach-in. Remember Jesus overturning the tables of the money changers? Well, that's what he did on the Monday before Passover. He tells thinly veiled parables about the religious leaders which cast them in a very bad light. This goes on for several days. By the time Wednesday has come around, Jesus denounces them openly: "Beware of the scribes," he says, "who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces... They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearances say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

'They devour widows' houses': that is Jesus' accusation against the religious authorities. They think they control access to God's grace by controlling the temple. The only way to get a little of that grace was to pay up: all those money changers were there to facilitate your purchase of the correct sacrificial animal, which, for the right price, the priests would offer to God on your behalf. The price was the same whether you were a poor widow or a rich merchant.

From the start of his ministry, Jesus' central message has been, "The Kingdom of God is at hand!" And that is a dangerous message, for it challenges both the secular and the religious authorities. If God is King over all, then Caesar is not. And in Jesus' vision of God's Kingdom, God's love is not mediated by priests at the temple but is free and available to all. Is it any wonder that both the Jewish and the Roman leaders wanted Jesus dead?

Nailing him to a cross was supposed to be the final solution. Get rid of the rabble-rouser, silence him, and his message would die with him. Crucifixion was the world's way of saying no to everything Jesus stood for.

The world says no to Jesus — but God says yes. This is the good news that Peter preaches on the day of Pentecost: “God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.” It's the first attempt at explaining what happened on Good Friday. The world rejects Jesus' message and tries to silence him in death — but God vindicates Jesus and raises him to life. The horror and violence we inflict on an innocent man shows the depth of human evil and the ultimate defeat of human power, by revealing the moral bankruptcy of human beings left to our own devices. But God's love as revealed in Jesus is life itself: Love that can never be silenced, never be killed. Love that will restore our lost humanity.

Out of this terrible violence, God has made an opening between heaven and earth. At the very end of the Passion narrative, at the moment of Jesus' death, Mark tells us that “the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.” This is the veil in the temple that separated the people from the power and love of God — the veil that contained God's presence, and behind which only the high priest was allowed to go.

This veil was torn asunder, and God's love is no longer contained in a temple. Jesus' redeeming work was to confront those who tried to keep God locked up. Jesus' life and teaching have shown us a new way. The scandal of the cross is that now, God's love can go anywhere and reach anyone. Even those who are different from us. Even those who don't deserve it. Even those who don't believe. God's love now permeates the whole universe and continually pulls us from death into life, with each breath we take, from the beginning of time until the end.

Amen.

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