Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday 2013
Christ Church Cathedral, Louisville

Liturgy of the Word: Is 50:4-9a; Ps 31:9-16; Phil 2:5-11; Luke 22:14-23:56

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Perhaps the most revolutionary and transformative words ever spoken in human history. “God, forgive my enemies, for they know not what they do.” With this prayer, Jesus takes all of the hatred and all of the violence and all of the vengeance of the world and says, “Enough.”

Enough of the spiral of violence and counter-violence that just leads to more of the same. It has to end. Brutality. Blindness to the sacred in all people. Death. Murder. Enough.

“Father, forgive them; they don’t know that they are doing.”

Now often humans think we know exactly what we are doing when we commit violence. WE say: We are righting a wrong in the very best way. We are preventing more violence. We are insuring safety. Justice is being realized. And perhaps the greatest slur: We are doing God’s will, carrying out justified or righteous retribution in God’s Name.

And when violence is done in our name, the same reasons are used. Too often individuals and nations alike think we know exactly what we are doing.

Father, forgive them. They don’t know.

Christ shatters the glamour of violence that blinds us in this world, and sets in its place a vision of reconciliation and peace. We remember that in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said to his disciples, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.”
What Jesus preached in the Sermon on the Mount, he practiced on the Mount of Calvary. On the cross, Jesus prays for his enemies, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do,” and everything changes.

Jesus of Nazareth lived and died in the real world, and it was a world saturated and captivated by hatred and violence. No Hollywood, no video games to scapegoat. In these first words from the cross, found only in Luke, Jesus reveals God’s own costly love for the world, mediating God’s forgiveness and friendship even in the midst of our violent world. From the cross, Christ takes all of it upon himself, all of the hatred and all of the violence of the world, and he says “no more.” Enough.

The deadly cycle of violence and counter-violence is broken, and begins to yield to a new world of compassion and solidarity and reconciliation. On the cross, we see God’s costly gift of love in the person of Jesus, and in the prayer of Jesus for the transformation of the whole world.

In this prayer, we see the truth of God’s love, as Daniel Migliore writes: “God’s compassion is greater than the murderous passions of our world, that God’s glory can and does shine even in the deepest night of human savagery; that God’s forgiving love is greater than our often paralyzing awareness of guilt, that God’s way of life is greater than our way of death.” In this prayer, Christ opens up for us, even in the midst of our broken and violent world, a new future of reconciliation and peace.

(adapted from a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Joseph Pagano, Sermons That Work)

Through the mystery of his death and resurrection Jesus saves us from the power of sin and death. He opens for us the way of everlasting life, and opens for us the way of life here and now by showing us that forgiveness leads us away from sin, and non-violence leads us away from death in all its forms: physical, spiritual, emotional.

The last two years I have shared with you the story of receiving a palm branch years ago from a most unexpected person, a street person, standing on a Rush Street corner on a rainy windy night in Chicago. Amidst well-dressed folks rushing to dinner or the theatre or to a condo in downtown Chicago, this man in layers of dirty clothes was so out of place. Thus many ignored him. But I’m sure some did not, and now nearly thirty years later, I still cannot ignore him. Without asking for money or anything, he offered palm branches to all who passed by him. Many declined, and
many who took a branch walked only a few steps and then let the palm fall to the ground. The man then picked up each discarded palm and placed it lovingly under his coat to protect the blessed palm from the rain.

Such “discarded palms” are the values of Jesus: “forgive your enemies”, “love one another as I have loved you”, “give up your life in order to find it”, “father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” All those values are out of place. Easily cast away and ignored. And yet, those priorities, those values of God’s son, are lived out at great peril. Proclaiming these values in word and deed subjects one to ridicule and rejection. These values led to Jesus’ death on the cross, the same cross we are called to take up in baptism. The cross we as the Church, the Body of Christ are to proclaim clearly and courageously to the world.

And so when society declares that:
   Violence is an answer to anything, we say: No More.
   Hunger is acceptable, we say: No More.
   Some poor will always be homeless, we say: No more.
For these conditions also do violence to God’s children.

Though Luke’s Gospel says otherwise, Jesus’ last words from the cross really are: Enough. No more.

Beloved, in this Great and Holy Week we glory in the Cross of Christ. We tremble before the mystery of our redemption forged on the cross, and weep as Love So Amazing and Divine hangs there. This holy and precious cross, signed on us in baptism, demands that we too reveal the power of Christ-like love. “Father, forgive them, forgive me, for they and I know not what we do.”

And then, we commit to understanding more clearly what Jesus truly wants us to do, and be, and why it matters so much.

Father, help us, help us, to be delivered from the evil of violence in all its forms, that we might love as you have loved us.