

Today is one of our celebration days- Palm Sunday we call it, that commemorates Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. And so the kids have processed with the palms and passed them to us, and we wave them, because this is a happy day. The palm fronds signify one of Israel's festivals, and we are told in the gospels that it was the time of Passover; so we're just carrying on the festive atmosphere.

But, for Jesus, juxtaposed against this joyful day in the gospel story, is the somber, deathly meaning behind his trip to Jerusalem. He is going down into the city to die. And for all the joy expressed by the "multitude of disciples" (Luke 19:37), danger is there, so that, when Jesus came near and saw Jerusalem, he wept over it (verse 41). What exactly did he see? He wasn't even in the city yet, but above it, coming down from the Mount of Olives, and he could see over the city walls the people hurrying down narrow streets or crossing the gleaming courtyard of the Temple, and the newer Roman buildings that stood over the ancient structures and historical areas as symbols of the Empire's might and its disdain. With the clarity of hindsight we think Jesus must have seen four decades into the future and the destruction of Jerusalem, and weeping that its time would soon be done. Maybe we are right, that Jesus sees, and bemoans, what his city and his

people, his culture and his religion had not seen, “if only you had recognized the things that make for *peace!*” he says.

Perhaps he has had a vision much like what Isaiah saw, hundreds of years before, and told to us in this 13th chapter of his story. It is a vision of Babylon’s downfall, but it could be the fall of any nation. Look how the elements of Isaiah’s account stand beside the story of Jesus and his disciples on the Mount, and then, how those elements are reimagined: the joyous shouts of the multitude become a different kind of “tumult on the mountains”- the ominous jangle of armies preparing for battle. See how the disciples delight in “the King who *comes* in God’s name” (Luke 19:38), which becomes in Isaiah, “the day of the Lord” that “*comes* with cruel wrath and fierce anger”; a day of destruction. Is this what Jesus saw? Who knows if he could remember verbatim this passage in Isaiah? But he understands the tone of it- after all, he is himself going down into the city to be destroyed; thus his weeping makes perfect sense, and matches exactly Isaiah’s command to “wail” for this Day of the Lord that is coming.

Here is the thing: in those earlier days of exile, when the nation of God’s people had been displaced to Babylon, they would have rejoiced at its destruction, glad to have seen punishment set upon this powerful and brutal kingdom. But now

Jesus sees it coming to his own nation, and he knows that might and wealth and religious rigor cannot save it- didn't save Babylon; power never saved any nation that has been- somebody comes along stronger and more ambitious, with new battle plans and new ways for making war. But Jesus weeps over the city because it didn't understand that making *peace* was the path to its salvation.

And I wonder if Jesus could see into the future far enough to picture this disturbing scene: the happy shouts of his disciples becoming the uproar of their own army mustering for war; if he could envision his band of disciples becoming the church triumphant, marching into a conquered city, covered in blood and reeking of death. That would be something for the Lord to weep over indeed: the church, a force that converts by the sword, rather than by healing and tolerance and teaching; and all the while calling its commander the Prince of Peace.

The stories we know, of Crusades and Inquisitions, of burnings and lynchings, and palace and ecclesiastical intrigue. And those days are not gone; it happens still today. How many other apostles and bishops and church leaders have built their faith upon such an oppressive view of humanity, and who refuse to hear the Lord's rebuke of that corruption of his teaching? Does Jesus weep over the church's sense of entitlement so that we give ourselves permission to bully and

intimate minorities or “heretics,” so that legislatures enact laws that encourage discrimination against “sinners”? Does Jesus commend those who believe the God of scripture commands them to rule over other people rather than to love other people? Are the blood and the beaten bodies of homosexuals and the dispossessed and the undernourished bodies of the poor and the hungry acceptable sacrifices to the God of our Lord? Is the smoke of burning churches and mosques a scent that rises to heaven and pleases God? These are important questions to ask. Was Jesus able to see so deeply into human hearts that he knew the rage of even his disciples? Do we see that possibility in our hearts; do we hear that word of anger and disparagement in those we heed and follow? On a holy day, in an election year, these are important questions to ask.

Jesus must have seen it. Remember the sermon text from last week, Luke 9, when Jesus was in Samaria and the people wouldn't listen to him, and James and John- two thirds of his inner circle of disciples- said “Let's burn them down.” It is a terrifying insight into religious fanaticism. And it's everywhere, not just among the radical misinterpretations of Islam, but in all religions and governments, where extremists believe it is their right to control and punish those who think differently. That is worth crying over, when the beautiful word of peace becomes twisted into

vengeful, hateful speech, and the hopeful teachings of Jesus the Messiah are distorted into a self-righteous attitude of the divine right of rule and authority.

How can we overcome that? By hearing again the story of a humble Lord, and seeing there, compassion and forgiveness instead of aggression; by making peace and seeking friendship instead of clamoring for war; by fellowship and hospitality and celebration. By sharing the love given to us- and all the good things we have- with those who have lost their things, or who have never known the profound love of a Lord who weeps for them.

In yesterday's reading from our Lenten booklet of devotions, Henri Nouwen has it that "newspapers and radio and television broadcasts reveal our unashamed desire to show our teeth and to fight. Real words of peace are seldom heard in our world, and mostly distrusted when spoken. And when said by our enemies, they are dismissed as propaganda. "Freedom" we speak confidently, but the word "peace" we say timidly, fearful of being considered disloyal and untrustworthy. Christians today, if they want to be Christian, must find the courage to prove to the world's people that Christians are peacemakers."

I think Father Nouwen would agree with me in the interpretation of our readings today, how the message of scripture is God's sorrow at the pride and the misunderstandings that drive peoples apart. The tears of Jesus prove it. And the

prophets tell us that the entire universe mourns such hubris: like here in Isaiah, where the sun and the moon and the stars will not give their light.

Even so, the word of scripture is also this, that *God's chosen one is coming-* in Luke, on the day called Palm Sunday, when the Messiah “comes in the name of the Lord”; and in Isaiah, where a powerful nation and God's chosen, benevolent, ruler come to defeat cruelty and oppression. And even today, God's chosen one comes- and that is the good news we celebrate today. But will the world recognize him by our singing and our shouts of joy and our words of humility and peace, or will they hear, rather, contempt in our voices and see in our character a resentful intolerance of others? It is for us to decide what kind of people and what kind of church we will be.