

## "Palms and Humility "

Phil. 2:5-11 March 20, 2016

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We all have a mental conception of what Palm Sunday was like - the crowds, the palm branches, the donkey - all the excitement and anticipation of a parade. It's very upbeat and celebrative. The children love it. And we do too. We wave our palm branches and contemplate this triumphant procession. Hosanna to the Son of David!

But in spite of all the Hosannas what keeps grinding through these texts is a **message about humility and suffering**. We even make a point of this in our order of worship. The first hymn speaks of glory, laud and honor. But the tone shifts quickly. The sermon hymn quickly leads our minds to the bitter suffering of the cross. The first lesson tells the familiar story of welcoming parade. But then, the Epistle lesson, the text for this sermon, says that Jesus didn't presume that his lofty position, his equality with God, would offer any privileges. He didn't wear his position like some badge of honor. Rather, he humbled himself and took the form of a servant. He was so obedient in this role that he died in it.

Now all my life I've been told that this image of a humble, dying Jesus is good news. But I must admit that there is something in my rational mind that argues against this idea. It is so counter-intuitive. I really find it difficult to believe. If the President of the US arrived in town not on Air Force One, with limousines and an entourage of security but rather in a battered old '79 Ford pick-up and got himself assassinated, I would wonder, *"What's up? What's going on? Who could allow this to happen? This doesn't make sense!"*

But far beyond that, we are told that the king of the universe so divested himself of any sign of position or power that people were quite comfortable in nailing him to a cross, thinking they had removed a threat to the community. Indeed, what's going on? Who could allow this to happen? It pushes against the boundaries of credibility to even imagine that it could happen, much less trust that it is good news.

And it is not just this one conclusive event. The Scriptures are continually insisting that the place to look for Christ in the world is not in situations of power, wealth, or prestige, but in circumstances of humiliation and weakness. That where there is injustice, He is with those who are treated unjustly. That where there is suffering, He is with those who suffer...that you are as likely to find Jesus in prisons and whorehouses as to find him in churches or the halls of Congress. In brief, **the inspired writers insist that God continually hides his majesty, that he is still, in effect, riding meek and lowly, on an ass, a donkey**. Even that is a surprise. Any one of position would have ridden a horse. A donkey is strictly a blue-collar animal. It is hard to absorb and accept.

There is something within me that clings to the idea that success is better than failure, that wealth is better than poverty, that power is better than weakness. And to

think that God calls all that into question, flips it upside down, just does not seem realistic.

Besides, **when you consider the implications, it is a little threatening.** This is where we must focus our attention... the implications. If that was God's Son riding into town on borrowed donkey, with an illiterate mob of rag-tag tax collectors and prostitutes clamoring after him, then you could never tell where God might show up next. He might still be found among addicts, thieves and child molesters. And if he shares in their lives, and doesn't consider himself above such people, going so far as to serve them and die for them, then he has with one stroke obliterated all the divisions and distinctions that I have worked so hard to maintain all my life. I'm not sure I like that. It's a little threatening.

If He can be poor with the poor, weak with the weak, despised with the despised... **If He can be so indiscriminating and profligate with his love, and I identify with him, call him my Lord and my Master... then I am constrained to love like that, to humble myself like that also!** My feelings, my attitudes, my judgments, my whole life would have to change, dramatically! It's a threat! It's a challenge.

**Let me tell you about my kind of God, the preferred model.** He is very majestic and holy, very set apart. So far apart that he is not particularly aware of what is happening in my life. He is very powerful, so as to do great things, but also a little naïve, spends a lot of time napping, as it were, so as to allow some folks to "slide by". For example, he should be able to solve the economic crisis of our country, but without me paying any more taxes. He should be able to feed the hungry while I continue to fill my table with tasty delicacies, worrying only about my waistline and my cholesterol count. And regarding sin and disobedience, my kind of God would be really irate about the really bad people in this world, the terrorists and drug dealers, but remarkably kind and understanding with respectable folks, like us, who maintain the status quo and support the establishment.

**You see, at heart I am a Pharisee,** and the humility and suffering of Jesus really rubs me the wrong way. It just puts everything out of sync. It destroys the comfortable rhythm of my life. But you know, **you've got the sickness too.** Your attitudes, your actions and words are transparent. Observe your feelings. Reflect on your goals. **What have you and I really got in common with the Servant who entered the Holy City on a borrowed beast to keep his appointment with Calvary?**

**However, on the other hand, and this is surely the most significant point of contrast in my life. I am not just a Pharisee. I am a disciple, a follower, a believer.** This humble Christ has overwhelmed me. Not with his might and majesty, but by the winsomeness of his humility, his terrible suffering, his meekness, his lowliness, and his death. The Spirit of God has graciously entered my hard and calculating heart and made me aware that **I am a forgiven Pharisee.** This unthinkable, unsettling, disconcerting death of Jesus was for ME! He humbled himself for me. He was obedient for me. And FOR YOU!

And if we can ever allow this truth to be more than an oft-repeated pious phrase, then we can **begin to understand how God puts his claim on us**. You see, humility doesn't intrude. It doesn't force or demand. I quickly raise up my defenses against these aggressive tactics. But this humble, seemingly insignificant posture of a servant has a way of touching my heart. It finally captivates me. It transforms me. It has won me over.

**And that is how He gets close to you.** He comes meek and lowly. He conceals his deity, his awesomeness, his power. Think of it. He comes hidden in ordinary water, in the cleansing power of Baptism. And in the simple words of the Gospel promise, "*He that believes in Me shall have eternal life.*" Wonder of wonders, he comes in something so lowly as this poor preacher's words. He dresses himself in the simple garb of bread and wine. He parades into our lives with the simple words, "*I love you. I have adopted you. You are my son, my daughter, and I will never leave you or forsake you.*"

There are no fireworks, no awesome displays, no fire and brimstone. This is where the street-corner preacher so often gets it wrong. We are drawn to Him not by fear, but by his tender, forgiving love. He comes meek and lowly. This is how he wins our hearts.

And **there is one final implication in all this**. Jesus is still coming into our world, reaching after the hearts of our lost, misguided brothers and sisters. And, wonder of wonders, He is doing it through you and me.

It is not that I am no longer Pharisaical, prejudiced, self-centered, arrogant and rude. Too often, I am all of those things. To put it very crudely, I am still an ass,( or a donkey, if your prefer) but I am an ass that carries the Lord. My King comes to me meek and lowly, and now I am charged to carry Him to others with meekness and humility. It is a mystery and marvel that it can happen this way, but it does.

**Ernest Hemingway** once said, "*I have always tried to write as best I can, but sometimes I am fortunate enough to write better than I can.*" So it is with us. Sometimes we can be more than we are. In this humble servant posture, we can actually become the instruments of God.

SO THAT...so that the whole human race might one day be privileged to sing, "*Ride on, ride on in majesty ; in lowly pomp ride on to die, Bow thy meek head in mortal pain, then take, O Christ, thy power and reign.*"

AMEN.