

Palm Sunday 2017 Following video clip of the crucifixion:

Luke 23:44-47 It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.' Having said this, he breathed his last. When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, 'Certainly this man was innocent.'

We know from the school of life that not every day is a day of joy and bliss: there are also gloomy days of suffering and disappointment. This Palm Sunday of the Lord's passion, we are told in no uncertain terms that this life of suffering and disappointment was freely accepted by Jesus himself.

First, we see him acclaimed in a small triumphal procession into Jerusalem. But then we hear opinions turn against him. After the initial enthusiasm of Hosanna, Hosanna we hear Crucify Him, Crucify Him. What changed and why so dramatically?

The scriptural witness is clear that those who wanted him killed were themselves religious leaders, comprised of Pharisees, Sadducees and other followers supportive of the Jewish religious hierarchical system. Why did these religious leaders want Jesus killed? Because they had witnessed a groundswell of people, both Jew and Gentile, who became captivated by him and his message and they felt threatened. They became frightened of Jesus and what he would do to their religious system.

This came to a climax in the cleansing of temple, when Jesus threw out the money changers and said "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up. He was referring to the temple of his body, not the huge temple of stone in which he stood.

This anti-temple statement of Jesus meant that the activity that Jewish people sought from God in the temple could now be found in the person of Jesus Christ. This disempowerment of the Jewish temple was a huge threat to the power and financial income to those who controlled the temple, namely the Scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees.

This was symbolized during the crucifixion scene itself, where the scriptures record that the curtain between the Holy of Holies and the common people was torn in two. The symbolism was clear, God and God's activities are now available to all people without having to jump through the hoops of the hierarchy who controlled the Temple. I don't know if we can comprehend the enormity of this change for people within the Jewish faith.

We saw something similar with Luther 500 years ago when he proclaimed that the pope and the priesthood was no longer necessary for people to connect to God. He too set aside a hierarchy in favor of a non-hierarchical approach to God. This was the ultimate threat to the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. Therefore they condemned Luther and would have killed him were it not for Frederick the Wise, the governor in the province where Luther lived in Germany, who hid him away in one of his castles and protected him.

Now today we see a similar kind of rebellion to institutional Christianity. Many people question why they need to attend church on Sunday when they can connect with God in other ways. This mentality is a threat to traditional Christianity and the future existence of churches as we know them.

It may be helpful to know that there are many theologians today who believe that Jesus never intended to start a church, such as we see today in our society. They argue that what Jesus wanted was for people to know that they were loved and accepted by God and that God was concerned about them and their poverty and brokenness.

Jesus taught that God cared about them even though they were on the margins of society and powerless. These were the people that were Jesus' major concern and who comprised the majority of his followers. They were the people that were looking for their daily bread and whose kitchen cupboards had little in them. This concern of Jesus becomes very obvious when you read the New Testament. He spent his time with those on the margins of society and told them that they didn't need the temple with all of its requirements, which many were unable to perform.

The early church was a gathering of those who followed the carpenter and experienced his life-giving transformation. They came together to hear his message and to participate in a communal life, where they received his body and blood and enjoyed one another's fellowship.

When Emperor Constantine, about 300 AD, made Christianity the universal religion of the Roman Empire, this changed everything. Christianity became the religion of the Empire. When this happened, it was expected that everyone, whether they were so inclined or not, were expected to be Christians.

The fruit of this kind of state sponsored empire religion manifested itself in our own country 75 or so years ago, when black men were lynched on Saturday night and the lynchers attended Sunday church services the next day. That was "Empire Christianity" and it was the opposite of what the followers of Jesus were about in the first century.

Constantine and the Roman Empire had corrupted the teachings of Jesus and it has been up to subsequent generations of Christians to return to his teachings and the roots of their faith.

Many elements of Christianity today in our own society is Empire Christianity, where the teachings of Jesus have been neglected or corrupted. I think this is the Christianity within our society that is dying. The death of the religion of Empire is a good thing and may it come quickly. From its ashes will arise the followers of Jesus who seek to go back to the values and teachings of the Master.

Jesus loves each of us and is calling us to follow him. But I don't think he loves our Empire any more than he did of the Roman Empire.

Jesus loves us and wants to have an intimate relationship with each of us. But that entails conversion, which is a daily activity for all of us, just as it was for the followers of Jesus during the last 2000 years.

We gather on Sundays to be nurtured by his words and the Bread of Life. He is present among us.

So, during this holy week we stand at the foot of the cross. He died to show us a better way to live and calls us to come and follow.

Let us pray:

God of all life, we come before you with green branches, symbols of life and youth.

Help us to be fools for Christ. One day we too will die. May our death be for the cause of our master and Lord, Jesus Christ to whom our knees bow and whom we not only worship but desire to imitate. Come Lord Jesus, empower us to be your followers. We consider ourselves very fortunate to be invited into intimacy with you. May you live and reign within our hearts and the hearts of all your followers, now and forever. Amen.