



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

## Palm Sunday Contradictions

The Rev Sharon Gracen

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I always find Palm Sunday to be a difficult day. It's one of those days that no matter what you think it is, it isn't. It appears to be all about triumph and cheering. But for the one on the donkey things must have looked different. Could he ignore what he knew in his heart was coming and enter into the festivity of the moment? For Jesus this was not a spontaneous response from his followers; it was an intentional provocation directed at the political leaders of the day. He was enacting the words of the prophet Zechariah, "Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey..." Everyone in Jerusalem knew that text as well, including the Roman authorities. It was political theater; it was also a pre-funeral procession. I wonder what it was like to see things from where he sat.

As he rode on that donkey, people were shouting his name and reaching out their hands to him, hoping to catch a little bit of his power for themselves. Certainly he loved them but was he a little weary of their adulation and need for him. Did he know how hollow it would be in the days to come? It's not that they were insincere. They were there for a festival. He was there to die.

So we have this day that begins in such frenzy and ends in such despair. We read the passion gospel and yet it is not quite time for it. Those days come later in this somber week. In my more cynical moments I wonder if the Passion Gospel was inserted here to accommodate those who will not come again until Easter Sunday. And that makes me sad. Can we not spare a few hours to stand in the presence of the cross at its most dangerous? It is after all more than a wall decoration or jewelry. It is the reminder of human brutality exposed for all to see. In the cross we see every instance of power exercised cruelty, torture and violence. Do we know that we have been saved from that? Jesus saving work on that cross is meant to save us from violence by ending it. This knowledge is apparently a work in progress for us some 2000 years later. We do not appear to have learned that violence leads to only one thing – more violence. And on this day violence comes into our church and it makes us uncomfortable.

How is it that Holy Week is too disturbing for many people, but violent movies and video games are always successful? What we are doing to ourselves. Do we mean to be a people who enjoy violence? The entertainment industry seems to have an internal

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competition to see who can fashion the most realistic gore in the most disturbing situations. The movies, television and video games enter our lives and desensitize us to cruelty. If you ask kids about their video games they will tell you “Oh yeah, it’s just fun, it’s not real.” The problem is that when we are faced with some images of real violence and cruelty—photos from Abu Ghraib, combat injuries, the images of suffering—we have lost a bit of our ability to be outraged. It looks a lot more benign than the stuff people buy a ticket to see.

Palm Sunday – would that we might hear the tension between triumph and violence. It is important for us to understand the ordeal to which Jesus allowed himself to be led. Crucifixion is gruesome. It was meant to be – execution and intimidation held high for all to see. I imagine that if it were still the preferred method of execution, debate on the death penalty would be short. It’s hard to wish that on your worst enemy. Oh my goodness, maybe that’s the point of it. What Jesus understood was that the only way to overcome what ails human relationships—the hatred, fear, and abuse—is to shine a light on it and expose it for the sin that it is. If we are disturbed by what happened to Jesus, an innocent victim of power brokers, then we should be equally disturbed when it happens to anyone else around the world today. He went to the cross so others might not have to.

This day gives us another contradiction – Jesus himself. This suffering and death is his most human moment. Without such an end, the incarnation would be incomplete, possibly insincere. God has entered into human life to redeem the worst within us. The use of the cross by those in authority pretty much sums up the worst of human behavior. But Jesus responds to it with superhuman grace. Who could minister to someone else when in such agony? “Forgive them, Father.” And to the thief crucified next to him, a promise of heaven. If he could forgive and be compassionate while having his nails driven through his hands and feet, what does it mean for us to hear “Take up the cross and follow me.” Darn, following this one is hard.

And there’s the last contradiction for us. For most of the year we engage our faith around here as a response to God’s love and generosity. We talk about abundance and joy. Yet today we are face to face with the expectation that we will engage humanity’s violence with courage, compassion, and grace. If what was done to Jesus was horrible, then we should stand up for an end to violence across the board. The Quakers have managed to do so for hundreds of years. Violence as a tool of power in international relations, in our communities and in our lives is not necessary or healthy or how we are meant to be.

Jesus died for our sins – maybe the right way to say that is that Jesus died because we are sinful, violent and broken people. He did so willingly so that we might become otherwise. So this Palm Sunday, we hear and we sing *Hosanna* and we begin that long walk behind Jesus to Friday. Don’t close your eyes to it for only by facing the cross can we be healed by it.

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