

Aspects of Christianity

March 28, 2010

Palm Sunday

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I want to talk to you about oatmeal and marmalade. I come from a very large family and my mother was a very bad cook. It didn't help that she had ten children, often many as crying babies or toddlers as she tried to cook, but her oatmeal was awful. It was always too lumpy, too watery, burnt, or just plain inedible. Every Christmas her cousin would send us a big box of oranges. I think he feared we would get rickets otherwise, and my mother would always turn the orange rinds into large vats of bitter, chewy marmalade. We were not allowed to eat jelly until we had consumed all of this bitter jam spread on toast. I grew to disdain oatmeal and marmalade, swearing never to eat it as an adult. Then, at a London hotel, I discovered real British oatmeal and marmalade. Both were absolutely delicious! I had never had good, or even reasonable, oatmeal and marmalade. There is much to be cherished in these foods if prepared well.

I sometimes feel the same way about Christianity. It brought the world the Crusades, the Inquisition, and war in Northern Ireland; actually lots of wars in lots of times and places. Its Bible has been used to justify slavery, bigotry, hatred, and contempt for other people. Its doctrines can be mind-numbing and irrelevant. So why do we even consider aspects of Christianity? It is a source of faith and comfort for literally billions of people. Many of the people we most respect, including our forebears at First Parish, were practicing Christians. I have discovered that the Christian way can be both spiritually rich and truly sublime. If you don't have a taste for Christianity, perhaps you haven't tasted good, or reasonably progressive, Christianity. I hope to explore some aspects of progressive Christianity this morning. In many Christian churches, like the one I grew up in, this Sunday is Palm, or perhaps Passion Sunday. Palm Sunday reflects a focus upon Jesus' triumphal entrance into Jerusalem on this first day of Holy Week. Wha-hoo! More traditionally, we speak of crowds yelling, "Hosanna in the highest!" Passion Sunday covers the whole week from hosannas on Sunday, to driving out the money changers on Monday, conflicts with Temple authorities on Tuesday, Judas agreeing to betray Jesus on Wednesday, the Last Supper followed by Jesus' arrest on Thursday, ending with his trial and crucifixion on Friday, which leads into a time of deep sorrow from Friday night until Easter morning. For those who wish to walk this path together in this place, this path is worth the trip! In the events of this Christian Holy Week, we can explore many major aspects of Christianity. For instance, it's called Passion Sunday because it focuses on the spiritual and physical suffering of Jesus described throughout the week. *Passio* in Latin means suffering. For Christians who think of Jesus as the third person in the trinity that is God, it is difficult to truly

imagine God experiencing the doubt, despair, pain and plain suffering that the Gospels portray Jesus experiencing this week.

Christians who emphasize Jesus' humanity, however, can often take comfort in the suffering he bore for many. In Matthew chapter 16 we are told that following his transfiguration "Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." The gospel of Luke tells us Jesus wept over Jerusalem, and invited his disciples to the Last Supper, saying, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer." That same evening, in the garden of Gethsemane he prayed: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done." We are also told that "in his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground." In the end Matthew says his final words when dying on the cross were, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Yet Luke tells us that the risen Lord, in explaining it all to his disciples, said, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to all nations, beginning with Jerusalem."

So how a Christian experiences this Holy Week tells you a lot about their conception of God, their conception of humanity, and what they feel Jesus may have meant to do for them. Marcus Borg, a Lutheran, and John Dominic Crossan, a Catholic, are two leading Christian scholars who write frequently about the variety of Christian understandings of theology. All three readings this morning were from their book entitled *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus' Final Days in Jerusalem*. In their preface they remind Christians that "The first passion of Jesus was the kingdom of God, namely, to incarnate the justice of God by demanding for all a fair share of a world belonging to and ruled by [a] covenantal [relationship with] God." They claim, "It was that first passion for God's distributive justice that led inevitably to the second passion by Pilate's punitive justice." Thus my sermon two weeks ago, *Economic Justice for All*, though not itself a Christian sermon, is completely consistent with a Christian understanding of Jesus' primary passion. Jesus, like all wisdom teachers, sought to teach and help us find a new way of being human, of being neighbors, and of being in covenantal relationship with God. That is why Borg and Crossan feel it is so important to understand Jerusalem was straining under a Roman occupation force.

The two processions beginning the Jewish holiday of Passover represent two very different forms of power. The Roman Governor has weapons, troops, wealth at his disposal. He can have killed anyone he fears might cause trouble for Rome or the Temple. Jesus has a group of timid peasants, who flee at the first sign of challenge, but he offers them an image of what the world would be like if humans were in covenantal relationship with the ground of all being. He eats with the undesirables, the marginalized, the outcasts, because to Jesus they are all children of God. There are Christians today who believe "my country right or wrong", or who are more

comfortable supporting taxes, regulations, and laws that further oppress the undesirables, their enemies, those marginalized by our economic and governmental system. But there are also Christians who feel that they are most closely following Jesus' example when they fight systems of oppression in order to better the lot of the outcast, the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed. Borg and Crossan say neither side really gets to exclusively define Christianity, but rather a Christian is as a Christian lives.

Jesus talked constantly about the kingdom of God. He sometimes called it the kingdom of heaven, and it may be that is why he was crucified. So what did he mean by it? Many Christians believe he was talking about heaven, where folks hope to go when they die, complete with halos and angels, and far better than the alternative. But if you read the gospels, they seem to remember Jesus making a very different point. He makes fun of people who claim it is an actual place: "Look here it is!" or, no, "There it is!" He is a wisdom teacher, teaching what his disciples called "the way" to eternal life; but he isn't talking about some other time and place, certainly not after we're dead, but rather he is talking about a way of living our life in the here and now, in community. He says, "in fact, the kingdom of God is among you." Jesus appears to be saying for all humanity: Come, my way, my truth, my life with God. Have I boggled your mind enough yet? No? Then let's talk about the need to repent, to believe, to trust and obey. These are important concepts for Christians, but would it surprise you to know that even these concepts are subject to widely varying meanings among Christians?

Mark is the earliest gospel written, and in his first chapter, the first thing he records Jesus saying is "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news." For this good news, fishermen dropped their nets and left their boats to follow him. Now we have all seen apocalyptic sandwich boards still today declaring, "Repent for the end is nigh." It's a good message; taken seriously, it freaks people out. And perhaps we have been approached by evangelicals asking, "Have you repented of your sins and been born again in Jesus?" Also a good message; taken seriously, it can freak people out. In the Hebrew Bible, which Christians call the Old Testament, the word we translate as "repent" simply means "to return" as from a journey or exile. Jesus is a Jewish wisdom teacher, so he could mean turn back and return to God. But the Greek word in the gospel that we translate as "repent" means something slightly different, it is more like to change your mind, to think differently. Borg and Crossan say that, for Jesus, "to repent is to embark upon a way that goes beyond the mind that you have." For Jesus, repenting and believing appears transformational.

Let's talk about believing, trusting and obeying. Many Christians today think that to believe is to affirm a set of ideas or doctrines about what is true. That is what they were taught. But the ancient meanings of the word "believe" mean to trust and make a strong commitment. Thus when Jesus calls his disciples to "repent, and believe in the good news," he doesn't mean some set of precepts, or doctrines to be named later by the church, but rather he is presenting a way of

being in relation to the ground of all being. In modern terms he seems to be saying: “Change your mindset, accept this path with your whole heart, being open to the transformative teachings you will discover if you journey with me.” This gives a whole different sense to the old gospel song: “Trust and obey, for there’s no other way, to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.” In fact, at the mystical, experiential level, the many aspects of Christianity melt away, all being somehow opening into the transformative power of God’s love as expressed and made flesh by Jesus.

So let’s return to our story: When Jesus enters Jerusalem, he is deeply critical of the Temple and its role in the Roman domination system. Jesus entered the temple that Monday and drove out all those making profits in God’s house, he overturned the foreign exchange desks (i.e. the moneychangers), and rather disrupted commerce. We are told that “when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him.” Not a good start to the week! So when Jesus returns to the temple on Tuesday, we are told, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders all question his authority, setting rhetorical traps in order to catch Jesus in blasphemy. But Jesus understands the ways of God and men too much to be caught in their rhetorical traps. Yet from these sharp rhetorical conflicts Jesus’ teachings becomes even clearer. One scribe asks, which of all the commandments is the most important? Knowing Jesus doesn’t seem to keep all the commandments, and appears unbound by tradition. Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear O Israel: the LORD our God is one; you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” Jesus here echoes the great Jewish rabbi Hillel, who himself a generation earlier had cited Deuteronomy and Leviticus in response to a challenge from other Pharisees to summarize Torah. Yet this cannot save Jesus, who has entered Jerusalem to establish God’s nonviolence against imperial domination, and overturned the Temple to establish God’s justice against priestly collaboration with the Roman authorities.

So his journey inevitably brings him to Maundy Thursday, “Maundy” from Latin for “mandate,” wherein Jesus offers a new way of being in this world. Having eaten together, and having washed his disciples’ feet by way of example, Jesus said, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” That is why following this worship service we will celebrate an open communion as set forth by Jesus’ example, with a sharing of his Beatitudes, a prayer of compassion, sharing of bread and wine, and a remembrance of the centrality of love in his teachings. Jesus offered these teachings for all, so all are welcome. Then in the garden of Gethsemane, in depth of the night, Jesus went to pray privately with his God. Mark tells us, he took his three closest disciples Peter, James, and John, and “began to be distressed and agitated.” He said to them, “I am greatly grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.” Yet they fell asleep. Jesus praying off by himself said

“Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet not what I want, but what you want.” While they slept, and he conversed with God in intimate fashion, collaborators and soldiers arrived with clubs and swords to arrest him. All of the disciples fled leaving Jesus to be sacrificed for everyone. This is the heart of the Christian message, to love one another, and it has a sweet savory taste in my mouth. Jesus taught that love is central to our relationships with God, to our relationships with each other, and to the formation of a faith community. This is all he needed to teach. I love you all dearly. Amen and Blessed Be.