

Palm Sunday: Matthew 26 & 27
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Church of the Good Shepherd
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Not a Spectator Sport

Long before I was born, my great-grandfather played baseball. He was pretty good at it, too, one of the great ones actually. As the first baseman for what was then the New York Giants, he batted .401 in 1931, and he remains the last National League player to bat over .400. He didn't do it for the accolades, though. My great-grandfather simply loved the game. Which made it all the more odd to me that I never saw him watch baseball on TV. On Saturday mornings, I'd go over to his house with my father and he'd be watching the news. At the time, I wondered why he wasn't watching something more important, like Saturday morning cartoons (I was a kid at the time). But as I grew older, I started to wonder why he never watched baseball. When I asked him about it, he said that the game played today isn't the game he knew. Players nowadays were in it for the money, and owners had made the sport into a business, a big business. Baseball today is a spectator sport, he said, not a game you play.

People sometimes treat religion that way, as a spectator sport—something you observe—watch—rather than something you do. This is true even for those who regularly come to church. They come to worship and sing the hymns, listen to the sermon, and receive communion, but their heart is not in it. They may have been going to church for years, decades, but church is just something they attend, not something they are a part of, that they participate in in any meaningful way.

The thing is, Christianity is not a “spectator sport.” Rather, it's a game we play. Or better, a way of life that we live. It's not enough just to watch from the sidelines, from the pews. Being a Christian means following Jesus, walking with him, getting involved in his life.

We have a particular opportunity to do that this week, Holy Week, as we remember the final days of Jesus' life. We began today with the celebration of his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. On Thursday we will reenact his Last Supper, his final meal with his disciples during which he gave them the new commandment. The next day, Good Friday, we'll relive Christ's Passion, his heinous torture, crucifixion and death, as process the cross from the park into the church. Then, after sitting vigil on Holy Saturday, we will finally join in the celebration of his miraculous resurrection on Easter.

We come to these events though not as if we were watching a play or movie unfold, unmoved and detached from the drama. Rather, through these reenactments we are drawn into Jesus' Passion, into his suffering, into his death and resurrection. The services this week put us right in the middle of the action, as it were. We become participants, fellow disciples, living through these wonderful, tragic, mysterious events. We feel the joy of the crowd as we welcome the Messiah, eagerly laying our palm branches and cloaks before him. We enjoy the companionship of Christ and the other disciples as we eat the Passover meal and then are astounded when he gets up to wash our feet. We kneel before the cross and are overcome by the horror and injustice

of it, by indignation at those who put him there and by our utter helplessness to do anything about it. And after the odious deed is done, we sit shellshocked with Mary and the other disciples as we try to understand what happened, what went wrong, and what is to come of everything now that Jesus is gone, only to be startled by news that Jesus has been spotted, alive and walking about in the Garden where his body was only days ago laid to rest in a tomb. Reliving these events, walking with the church as we journey through Holy Week, we become a part of the events, and they become a part of us. And we come out the other side better, more faithful people because of it.

That is not to say we *enjoy* Holy Week. The events of Christ's Passion are not something we can ever take pleasure in. Holy Week is a hard week, not just on account of the gravity of the events but also for what experiencing these events does to us.

I'll give you a "for instance". Look at how we began this morning as part of the crowd who welcomed the coming of the Christ, shouting "Hosanna" and pronouncing blessings on Jesus, and then moments later we joined with the crowd in calling for his death. The way the gospels tell it, the same 'crowd' praised Jesus' arrival as called for his ultimate departure. So what are we to make of this?

Historically speaking, we might say that what happened was that the crowd thought Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, God's anointed agent who would lead a rebellion against the hated Roman and restore the glories to Israel. But when that didn't happen, and Jesus was arrested by those Roman authorities, they probably figured he was just another wannabe Messiah that turned out not to be. Best to be rid of him then, to offer him up to the Roman power, lest Rome have any more reason to tyrannize them. Rome, you see, was not above demanding more taxes, curtailing personal freedoms, or taking away their homes just to make a point. No one wanted that. So, they figured better he die than suffer Rome's wrath.

That may be true, historically speaking. But there is a deeper, theological point to be found here. That the same people who were praising Jesus one minute as were calling for his death the next is an instance of what the Reformer Martin Luther called *simul justus et peccator*, the idea that we are at the same time both saint and sinner, guilty and justified. You see, that the same people are capable of praising God and then betraying him is not something unique to the crowd there in Jerusalem, but is something that we each do. Like the crowd, we are happy to join Jesus in the triumphal parade, to wave our palms in defiance of our enemies, but when it comes time to stand up with him against social pressure and institutional threats, we are often nowhere to be found. When our association with Christ becomes a liability, when we find ourselves having to sacrifice or suffer or give something on account of our faith, we are all too ready to offer Jesus up on the altar of convenience or security or whatever good we value more than Christ. That may sound harsh, but this is what our participation in Palm Sunday does—it puts us in the story and invites us to see how we are not all that different from those described in Scripture, for better or worse.

Indeed, when we resist engaging in the story, refusing, say, to join with others when they shout "Crucify him!", we show ourselves to be in fact spectators, not players, admirers, but not *followers* of Christ, holding Jesus at a distance to protect ourselves, to protect ourselves from

the accusations of Christianity's critics but also from the challenge of Christ himself. Even so, we are called to see how these *detached* ways of ours, our refusal to get too involved, in fact lead to our *involvement* in Christ's death and ultimately to our redemption on the cross.

This is the virtue of Holy Week in general—it wrenches us out of our pretensions of admiring Jesus and into participation in the shocking, terrifying, exciting, inspiring story of Christ, out of the comforts of our lounge-chairs and out onto the field. To participate in Holy Week, to follow Christ and not just admire him, is to walk with him down a road to the cross, a road that highlights our sins, that reveals our complicity in his death and that shows us the depths God has gone to bring us back. To be sure, this road is a narrow way, and few of us really want to walk it. But by following it, following Christ, we will find that we have become participants in the greatest story ever told, the greatest game ever played, the greatest life ever lived. Amen.