



Let us pray: *O Jesus, the Son of God, who was silent before Pilate, do not let us wag our tongue without thinking of what we are to say and how to say it.*

We have gathered here, week after week, sharing a common quest for a deeper faith and a deeper experience of the divine. ¹ I invite you now to let go of the things that distract and concern you. Listen! The time is drawing near. Jesus is preparing to enter Jerusalem. How will we greet him? Will we follow him all the way to the Cross? The power of Jesus is that he lived what he taught, even when it led to his death. He lived with an abiding awareness of God, radiating the light of God in all he said and did. But that light was too much for the world. There are forces today, as there were in ancient Judea, that conspire to put it out. Where are we in this drama? What are we willing to risk to follow Jesus? It is particularly

relevant today when even Pilate realized that Jesus had been turned over to him due to jealousy.

Today, Jesus enters Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. A king but not in the normal way of earthly rulers. Not the way Pontius Pilate enters on the back of a spirited horse and dressed in armor with an army behind him carrying spears and shields letting those they pass by know that the might of Rome is at hand to put down anyone who dares to challenge the authorities. Quite a contrast on this day: Jesus from the south on a donkey hailed by the crowds while Pilate enters from the north with an army and any watchers almost certainly quiet and stoic at this show of imperial Roman might.

A meditation from the Henri Nouwen Society reminds us that:

People who live close together can be sources of great sorrow for one another. When Jesus chose his twelve apostles, Judas was one of them. Judas is called a traitor. A traitor, according to the literal meaning of the Greek word for "betraying," is someone who hands the other over to suffering.

The truth is that we all have something of the traitor in us because each of us hands our fellow human beings over to suffering somehow, somewhere, mostly without intending or even knowing it. Many children, even grown-up children, can experience deep anger toward their parents for having protected them too much or too little. When we are willing to confess that we often hand those we love over to suffering, even against our best intentions, we will be more ready to forgive those who, mostly against their will, are the causes of our pain.

In talking about this Sunday and what it means, or doesn't mean, to various people, the responses are varied. Each is valid and each is different. That doesn't mean one is "right" or another "wrong." It is a reminder that we each are here today coming from different places and

¹ Much of today's homily is taken from <http://processtheology.net/resources/liturgy/lenten-candle-liturgy> (January 11, 2014)

experiences of “church” and this time in the life of the church and in our own lives. We can learn something about faith from those who experience today and this next week in different ways from the way we do. Honestly pondering those differences can deepen our own faith if they cause us to ask why we feel as we do.

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As always, our questions and reflection are on what Scripture meant to the people of the time and also what it means for us today. One without the other leaves us without a firm foundation for understanding how to live our life and how to be in community with each other. Scripture was written down and has come to us because it says something important about our history and our faith. In the words of one theologian, faith is not about doctrine or dogma or a set of principles which we must assent to. Rather, faith is about pondering the issues of our day and determining how we will respond.

The traditions and experience of our church can enlighten us on how others before us have handled similar challenges and questions. Faith helps us live in ways congruent with what we understand about God and how Jesus models a life of complete integrity. To the people of the time, Jesus was proclaiming that he was not an earthly king, an earthly Messiah, despite what many longed for. He lived his life authentically, meaning that he lived in ways consistent with love of God and love of neighbor regardless of the cost to him. He was outward focused on who needed help and how those needs might be met. He was inward focused in that he regularly took time alone and time to pray. He taught and he healed and ultimately he died. To us, Jesus remains all of these things and much more, because we know how the story ends.

For today, let us focus on the triumphal entry into Jerusalem –the high point of Jesus’s earthly career, if you will. While processing around the church and waving palms and partaking in shouting out “crucify him” do not appeal to everyone, for some it offers a way to enter more fully into the experiences of those days. This is a matter for personal piety.

Yes, it is not done often in our contemporary culture. Yes, some recoil from shouting out “crucify him” as asking us to take on too much guilt. Guilt and betrayal are not topics that we like to dwell on. And yet, they are fundamental to the Scripture we read today and will read over the next week. Guilt and betrayal are not limited to Jesus’s time. They are everywhere today.

Too many of us speak negatively about ourselves: “I’m too fat. I’m too stupid. I can’t do this or that.” Our inner dialogue with ourselves puts us down. We are guilty of not meeting society’s expectations – or our own or our family’s expectations of what it means to have a good life. We betray ourselves when we do not believe we are beloved of God. We betray those we profess to love when we do not treat them as we wish to be treated. We hurt and we harm by opening our mouths and wagging our tongues without thinking about what we are saying and to whom. There

² Id.

is a strong difference between constructive criticism that truly seeks the betterment of someone else and negative comments meant to tear someone down.

In our world, the palm branches and cloaks laid down on the roadway to celebrate our victories turn into dust quickly. “What have you done for me lately? What have you done for me today?” Past accomplishments too often count for little when we are focused on our own needs and wants to the detriment of others. Today is a valuable story in our faith journey. If even Jesus, the Son of God, can go from hosannas to crucifixion in one short week, then we ought not to be surprised when something that we were praised for becomes like ashes in our mouths at some point in the future. With our 24/7 news cycle, nothing good seems to last for very long. But something that goes wrong seems to take on a life of its own and it becomes what we are remembered for to our grief and feelings of betrayal. Best intentions and horrible outcome.

This is not to deny tragedy and betrayal- rather to remind us that we need, at least sometimes, to look at the bigger picture and to be careful with where and how we assign blame and guilt. This same issue confronts us as we interact with our family and friends.

Yes, Judas betrayed Jesus to the religious authorities. Yes, his society was not willing or not able to hear the message of love God and love neighbor, even when expressed in new and different ways. As you continue this next week, I invite you to be present here at St. John’s at 7 p.m. Monday for Evening Prayer and Thursday for our service project and our Maundy Thursday service. On Good Friday we will worship at noon at First United Methodist or at 7 p.m. at First Christian. Take this opportunity to worship in different ways from Sunday mornings. Take this opportunity to hold yourself or loved ones up in prayers. Take this time to hear again the story of God’s love for us, even to Jesus submitting himself to death on a cross symbolizing the taking on of our sins in the hope of resurrection and restoration to relationship with God.

Yes, in our lives there has been guilt and betrayal. There will be guilt and betrayal. It is the human condition. We do not have to live there, though. Jesus gives us the model of how to respond to times when we feel guilty or when we have been betrayed by those we love. Jesus gives us hope that we, too, will one day be with him waving palms and shouting hosanna. And that the hosannas will go on and on and on, evermore.

Let us pray: Loving God, there are so many choices before us every day. Choices offered by our friends, our families, our culture, our own past. Some of them encourage the well-being of the earth, ourselves and our neighbors; others are destructive. Help us to distinguish between them. May we learn from the choices of Jesus and embody compassion, justice, and inclusion in all we say and do. **Amen.**