

LOOKING BACK TO SEE AHEAD: HINDSIGHT, INSIGHT AND FORESIGHT

A Reflection shared on Palm Sunday, March 16, 2008

Text: The Passion Narrative from the Gospel of Matthew (26:36-75, 27:1-66)

Preface

In an article entitled, "Bearing the Cross in the Global Economy," author Tim Kumfer shares the following story:

In college, I took a cultural exchange trip to Rome over spring break. Just around the corner from St. Peter's Square, I bought my father, a minister, a crucifix for his office.

Last year, I saw that same souvenir identified in a report from The National Labor Committee those same crucifix souvenirs as having been made in Chinese sweatshops. The report, titled "Today Workers Bear the Cross", documented the oppressive treatment of the workers in the Junxingye factory in Dongguan, China, who make crucifixes and other religious items to be sold to the faithful in the West.

The young women workers are routinely forced to work 14-15 shifts, seven days a week for 26-1/2 cents an hour, which is half of China's legal minimum wage of 55 cents an hour. After fees deducted for room and board, the workers take-home wage can drop to just nine cents an hour The products are then sold for upwards of \$20 in the U.S., in churches like New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral and Christian bookstore chains throughout our country.

The author concludes, "If God despises praise songs and offerings presented in the absence of justice, as the Hebrew prophets tell us, then crucifixes and plastic Bible covers made on the cheap at the expense of workers in Chinese sweatshops must really make God mad. The image of women toiling away in sweatshops while handling an icon of the suffering body of Christ is quite striking."

A disturbing image. A sobering thought. How can one worship a personal savior, and avoid following in the way of the cross? In Lent, in what has become our little custom, we lay down and offer up our personal burdens (the stones). But likewise, we acknowledge our collective complicity in our failures to our neighbors, to one another (the sticks from the "tree," the traditional symbol of the cross). Palm Sunday is the occasion and the opportunity when we might once again look back to see "the way," the way ahead.

Palm Sunday

Palm Sunday, otherwise known as Passion Sunday, is a two-part mini-series condensed into a single drama; the contrasting juxtaposition of two sequential events.

It begins with Jesus' quirky little parade thru the gates of the great city, riding a jackass, with peasants rolling out the red carpet made of palm branches. Matthew wants to suggest it is the messianic fulfillment of ancient prophecy; but the awkward image does not really convey the kind of majestic triumph they'd come to expect, let alone any reassurance of their happy futures.

The telling of the tale was intended to shore up some earnest, but short-sighted human hopes; based on other very-human thoughts, beliefs and emotions. The thoughts were about liberation from the oppression of the occupation forces of a foreign Empire. And the emotions must have been mixed; though I can imagine they included fright, fear and loathing, and even a sort of bitter, vengeful hope in the face of repressive domination or oppression. The crowds who could not be silenced were the underdog pack of the marginalized and disenfranchised. Still, looking back on it, they must have been looking forward to more than they got.

All this Palm Sunday business, then, is set over against the continuing storyline. Within a couple of days the powers that be would have their day. The fickle crowds would turn mild disappointment into disillusionment, then into resentment and worse. And those who'd been closest to the "One who was to come" -- those chosen 12 who'd sat at the master's feet and listened to the stories with ears to hear, and watched the miracles before their very eyes with eyes to see -- would see their own audacity to hope turn to dust in the winds of shifting loyalties and populist opinion.

It is -- in many respects -- the same old living drama of the harsher reality that -- when push comes to shove -- it is all-too-common in our human experience for our thoughts, beliefs and feelings to turn even would-be believers against not only each other, but ourselves; and betray our higher, more godly instincts, with lines like Peter's insistent denial, "I do not know the man!"

Palm Sunday is all about the “*hosannas*,” meaning, literally, “save us!” Save us, presumably, from those who oppress us. But it also comes to mean something else, when in the course of our own self-serving sense of survival, there’s another story that comes along.

It’s the one about the more passionate intrusion of what we call the “Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ,” which inserts itself and confronts our cries of “Hosanna” (save us), when those cries turn instead to “Crucify him.” As Pilate unwittingly asks, “You’d crucify your Lord?” That is, we would crucify our hope and our salvation? God save us from ourselves.

Now, because you and I have re-enacted this little drama before -- like a perennial reminder of the faith we would profess and live -- we know it will take an Easter story to save us from ourselves. The barren cross -- once laid bare like dry, brittle twigs -- will bud and leaf with a kind of irrepressible divine refutation that will bring new life out of the death of the old.

But for now, we stop to look back on this two-part mini-series; and the cross upon which we might be willing to reluctantly put to death any such notion we can save ourselves, from ourselves; as we try to do time after time, *ad infinitum*. In our perpetual looking back, might there be another way to use our *hindsight* to give us a little more *insight*, and move us forward from now on with a little more *foresight*?

Listening to this story, or reciting the character lines once again as we have just done, have you ever wondered what it would be like to go back in time and be a living part of the story we just re-enacted once again? What would it have been like the first time around? And, if you knew then what we know now -- what happened following the Palm Sun procession, the last supper, the arrest, trial, crucifixion and interment -- if you knew then what you know now, what would be different for you?

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I asked myself this question last week, while driving down the road listening to a program on the subject of *time travel* on NPR. There was a physicist pitching the notion that somehow (I don’t presume to understand this at all) going back in historical time was not a theoretical impossibility.

Then, during the course of the show, listeners called in to respond to the obvious hypothetical: given the chance to return to a former time and meet some long-gone famous person, when and who would that be? How about Galileo or Newton? Alexander the Great or Julius Ceasar? Shakespeare or Dante? The Greek philosophers or some ancient, mythic heroes. Mohammed, Moses or Jesus of Nazareth?

Knowing then what we know now, what difference could it possibly make; both personally and possibly in the course of human history? What insight might such hindsight afford us looking forward?

When I was much younger I dreamed of being a famous singer/songwriter. Admittedly, I envied the genius of a John Lennon, a Paul Simon or a Bob Dylan. Knowing their repertoire better than they probably knew it themselves, I would fantasize. If only it could go back and be the one to write a few of those lines and compose a few of those melodies. Maybe we could have collaborated, I conceded to myself, so it wouldn’t be plagiarism. How ‘bout it? “You may say I’m a dreamer, but (I betcha) I’m not the only one ...”

There’s always a problem, of course, if we actually could go back and effect or alter the course of the way things turned out. If things hadn’t happened the way they did, then other things presumably wouldn’t have happened either. This would not only include the good things that came to be, the things you wouldn’t have changed for the world; but also those things we might have altered if we could have; but which, only in retrospect, tuned out to be blessings in disguise. Or maybe still will be sometime in the yet-to-be future. As things progress in time (or unravel!) there’s sometimes the silver lining, the second chance, the renewal of something emerging out of the unwelcome death of something in the past, or even crucifixion itself.

If only I knew then what I know now ... then what? The *what-ifs* of doing anything differently than the way things turned out could begin altering things in unexpected ways with unknown consequences. But do we have to only go backward in order to move forward? If anything, what is it -- in hindsight -- that can give us some *insight* to afford us the gift of *foresight*? That is what I believe the cross of Christ is all about, and the message of Easter.

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Those of us who've been reading Jim Wallis' latest book this Lent, *The Great Awakening*, will remember the story he tells of his father, in the chapter in which he advances his notion of "nonviolent realism," as a way to move us forward, beyond the antiquated and futile paradigm of war-making.

Wallis relates how he first heard the story when he had accompanied his father on a recent trip to visit the war memorial. A naval officer in the Pacific theater during the last few months of WWII, Jim's father had been convinced of the necessity to use the atomic bomb to put an end to the violence and destruction of that war. But immediately after the Japanese surrender he'd been deployed to Hiroshima to assess the impact of the bomb.

"The devastation, he told me, was like nothing he had ever seen or imagined. He described how the nuclear explosion had sucked out all the air in the area, and when it rushed back in everything was flattened, even huge factories ... Along with many of his fellow soldiers, he felt that the Japanese had deserved the atomic bomb ... but then he saw Hiroshima.

As the young GI walked through the flattened rubble, he passed a small pile of bricks that had been fashioned into a makeshift shelter. Suddenly a little girl appeared from behind a wall. My father remembered her as about five years old, with dirty tattered clothes falling off her body." Wallis then goes on to relate hearing his father recall this experience,

"As he talked about the child, he seemed to remember her vividly, as if it were yesterday. He recalled the feelings that welled up inside him: she was just an innocent child. She would soon die from exposure to the radiation. My dad, an eighty-two year old war veteran began to weep as he remembered a day more than sixty years before. 'That's war,' he said, 'and that's why I hate it.'"

Wallis wrote the words to this chapter of his book on the occasion of the fourth anniversary of the commencement of our American war in Iraq.

I read his words last week as I not only prepared for Palm Sunday-Passion Sunday, but reflected on this week's observance of this same war's fifth anniversary. It makes me ask what insight might we finally now gain from any hindsight that might give us a different kind of foresight than the bleak predictions of *déjà vu, all over again?* How might we move to the emergence of anything new out of all the devastation and death of the past five years of utter folly?

In this morning's *New York Times*, there was an article in which seven "experts" experienced in military

matters and foreign affairs are asked to reflect and comment on how their views have changed based on what they now know. Their comments ranged from lack of adequate post-invasion planning for "nation-building," to the deadly combination of arrogance in our military capability and ignorance of the people we would both liberate and devastate, to lack of oversight by Congress, etc.

These were all policy experts from Washington think tanks, military strategists or former administration officials; except one former boots-on-the-ground marine-turned-author, who was part of the initial invasion and rush to Baghdad. He cited the pre-occupation and distraction over the concern that Saddam would use WMDs in the ensuing battle; which, of course, not only turned out to not be the case (since he didn't have them), but was presumably the reason for the invasion in the first place.

If only we knew then what we know now is an oft-repeated refrain. And all the while, the American war in Iraq has become an extended mini-series that has no planned final season. It began with a victorious, triumphal entry into an ancient city of the Middle East; and this time the successful overthrow or replacement of the military & political regime of domination by a coalition of willing foreign occupation forces. But it is an old paradigm that leaves us prisoners of our own war with the very conflicts we perpetuate.

If only we knew then what we know now is an oft-repeated refrain. ... But it is an old paradigm that leaves us prisoners of war with the very conflicts we perpetuate.

The likelihood of ongoing strife and conflict for years to come seems hauntingly familiar for some of us. It's like *déjà vu*, all over again. Despite all that we *do* know now that we didn't seem to know then, all this insight seems to have afforded us little foresight.

Instead, the former, triumphal cries of "Hosanna" (save us) have now devolved, at best, into a search to find a way to extricate us from our own blind folly, and save us from ourselves. If ever once regarded as victors and heroes, there are still those who would have us remain prisoners of war, entrapped in a fruitless cycle with the kind of hindsight that leads nowhere.

Such are *some* of the sticks, perhaps, in all the sticks and stones we've come to acknowledge this Lenten season; and of which we might "repent, ""turn around and change course." They are the sticks with which we have continued to construct crosses of crucifixion;

where “hosannas” turned to “crucify” and “I do not know the man.” Might we, once and for all, choose to know the man?

We know all too well the ways of crucifixion. But it is not the way of the cross. And it is not the way of the One who is to come again this Easter; and give us eyes to see – yet once again, and once and for all – the way of life.

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