

Palm Sunday 2021

Dignity/Boston

What a journey it has been since last we celebrated Holy Week! How we need the time of remembrance, reflection, and renewal this week offers, along with the chance to consider how agony and community, grief and triumph are woven into salvation history. This week can feel especially poignant as we continue to need to confront evils—especially in the recent mass shootings in Atlanta and Boulder, in the latest rejections by Church officials, as we struggle to appropriately welcome immigrants through our nation’s southern border, as we witness the exclusion of Black and poor people from our democracy. These struggles walk alongside the hopes many of us welcome as more of us get vaccinated or know eligibility is within sight, as we breathe more easily as competence and compassion ascend in our federal government, as science and facts are re-legitimized, as we watch the greening of our neighborhoods in the warmth and the rain. I imagine many of the traumas and graces of the past year will echo within us as we move through the traditions of this liminal time.

I was trying to picture what a Palm Sunday experience would be like today. I imagine a highway or major street lined on both sides with individuals, family groups, or couples physically distanced and masked, jumping and cheering, waving their arms, trying to capture the moment on cell phone cameras, as a police escort precedes a convertible where revered shero/hero/theyros smile and wave, acknowledging the crowd’s enthusiastic welcome, cheer, and tears. Who is in that car? Is it Dr. Fauci? Stacey Abrams? President Biden and Vice President Harris? The nurse who administered your vaccine, or the medical staff who cared for loved ones during the year? A friend or partner who kept your spirits from crashing during these difficult months?

Whoever you would turn out to recognize with such gratitude has answered a profound longing, soothed tremendous fears, and provided concrete hope to many. They have become pivotal figures, marking survival of a dark time, and signifying the inbreaking of better days. I find it meaningful that the people who turned out to greet Jesus created a parade, thronging in front of him and behind him, becoming a swarm of humanity, loudly, joyously, triumphantly surging toward the Temple, the sacred heart of the community. I’m sure those present remembered that day the rest of their lives. It was a mountaintop moment. And it was a movement, not just an individual, that entered Jerusalem with such a sense of exultation on that day.

Yet within days, the person at the very center of this jubilation would be captured, imprisoned, beaten, mocked, sentenced to death, and paraded through the streets as an example of the power of the state and religious officials to squash an uprising of hope. I imagine many of those who reveled with Jesus as he entered Jerusalem lined the streets once again, bewildered and devastated as he was led to his shameful death. Where was the commitment to what he represented? Was there really no salvation from their struggles, their oppression?

On Ash Wednesday, Ron reminded us that the Lenten journey is about tearing open our heart, reconciling with God, and answering the call to be ambassadors, co-workers with Christ. Those calls are amplified in the commemoration of Palm Sunday and tested as we move through Holy Week. Will we comprehend what Jesus does at the Last Supper, in the sharing of the bread and the cup, in washing his disciples' feet, even in acknowledging that he will soon be betrayed? Will we have the courage and compassion to stand with Jesus at the cross, to be a part of his agony and his dying? Will we trust in the miracle of the empty tomb?

As the crowds surged into the streets of Jerusalem, they may not have realized they were becoming part of the early Christian community—the people who carried Jesus' ministry and mission forward. It turns out, our hope cannot be contained in any one person, no matter how they may symbolize that inbreaking of a new day. It is in community that hope triumphs, as we raise one another up and reject the forces of oppression, whatever their source. As we begin Holy Week, let us remember that God is with us in every moment of these mysteries, the ecstasy and the agony, the breaking and the blessing, the dying and the rising.

Marianne Duddy-Burke