

CORONATION DAY

On Palm Sunday, Jesus was through being cautious about His purpose and His real identity. His baptism did not begin His religious life, but it crystallized His identity and His purpose, and forty days in the wilderness had clarified His strategy and the methods He would use to accomplish His purpose. It was not guesswork – it was prayer work. If Jesus had announced His purpose and His identity early on, He would have been dead before He had time to get anything started.

Another year, we say to ourselves, might have brought even more followers, but Herod and Caiaphas were already determined to arrest Him. Jesus did not have another year. And it was imperative for Him to make His move at Passover time. Palm Sunday was a crucial part of His plan, so He had planned it well.

Jesus had done many miracles; He had told provocative parables; He had adopted the prophetic title “Son of Man”; He had dropped a thousand hints from one end of Palestine to the other. Patiently and consistently, Jesus had provided the evidence – all the evidence any person should have needed in first-century Palestine. It all pointed to one conclusion, and more and more individuals were catching on: Jesus was the long-awaited, long-expected Messiah. (“Messiah” translates into *Christos* in Greek: the anointed one.) Jesus was the Rightful King of Israel. Jesus was God’s “Chosen One” – the focal point and fulfillment of Israel’s destiny and purpose. This was either boundless pride or incredible humility, depending on whether or not it was true.

* * *

As an aside, please note that God does not straight-arm us. This is essentially a gentle story – from God’s side. However dramatic it seems to us, however much humans turn it into violence – from God’s side, it is a pretty gentle touch. God does not come storming into our history or into our lives with thunderbolts, earthquakes, war, or pestilence, smashing everyone who gets in the way or disagrees. That is the way ancient people often told the story, but that has never been *God’s* way.

If that is what we are waiting for, forget it. God wants a *relationship*, and so God wants us to come because we *choose* to, because we comprehend his presence for ourselves, because we discover it genuinely. It is not a relationship between equals, so God is patient, subtle, gentle, forgiving – “long-suffering,” the Old Testament says again and again. God goes to great lengths to *not* overwhelm us, to *not* override all our circuits, to *not* get us into a position where we are forced to conclude what God would rather have us awaken to and rejoice in. Even so, it sometimes seems pretty dramatic to us.

All of our ancient traditions say that we never see God “face-to-face.” The glory would overwhelm us and take away our free will. We could no longer learn or grow or come into the relationship authentically. God awakens us and reveals things to us continually – at least as much as we can handle based on how much we have learned to trust God so far. But it is never even close to the full picture. Where do we think we are?! Do we still have some measure of humility?

Many people prefer to go on with their lives in their own way until God “makes” them behave. Have you ever watched little children? Some of us are waiting – waiting until God *makes us* believe and behave. But that is not going to happen. God waits for us to come part of the way because of our own desire and willingness – of our own free choice. And sad to say, we cannot outwait God. That’s the reason for about ninety percent of the suffering in our world. We are trying to outwait God, playing hard-to-get, doing things our own way – waiting for God to come *make us* believe and behave.

* * *

By Palm Sunday, the evidence was overwhelming for anybody who was paying attention – for anybody who was not determined to ignore it. There should have been little doubt left in anyone’s mind. Those in authority would not have killed Jesus if He had not made it crystal clear. Only the Messiah could have the power that Jesus was displaying. Only the Messiah could have the wisdom and understanding that Jesus was revealing.

But many people assumed that the Messiah would use military might – that the Messiah would be a great warrior, like his ancestor David. They assumed the Messiah would smash anybody who got in the way or disagreed with his leadership. Jesus’ failure to do this

smashing and destroying is why Judaism does not believe Him to be the Messiah to this day, and it is why many “Christians” do not fully believe in Him yet either. Much of Christendom is waiting for Jesus to “come again” – to return and do this smashing and destroying because He did not do it right the first time. We are waiting for kingdom come, waiting to give our full allegiance and support, waiting ... when the Kingdom has already come and Jesus is already in our midst – waiting for *us!* WE are the ones who need to come again: back to our God, and back to our true selves.

Palm Sunday is absolutely essential to the story; we cannot understand the rest if we skip over it. But more and more churches are starting to skip over Palm Sunday. They think there is not enough to say, that there is not enough “message” to Palm Sunday, and so now we call it “Passion Sunday,” even in official church calendars. “Wave a couple of palms if you like, but let’s get on into Holy Week and things that really matter. Jesus didn’t do it *our* way, so it’s time to get over all this mercy and forgiveness stuff and get on with it. Take all the good guys into Heaven and throw all the bad guys into Hell and get on with it!” That is how we think, but that is never how God thinks.

If Jesus is *God’s* Messiah, then Jesus *did* do it right the first time. Jesus rejected the smashing-and-destroying approach as unusable for His purposes. God wants a love relationship with his children, and you cannot get that by brutality or physical force. God works to convince, to change – from within. God builds on growth and learning and comprehension and awakening. If we are waiting for blood in the streets before joining God’s Kingdom, we will wait a very long time. Indeed, some of us have been. Only, as mentioned earlier, we cannot outwait God. And the only blood Jesus is willing to shed is His own. God is never going to beat up the people we do not like, and God is never going to stop any of us from doing evil. It is a bitter pill to swallow – unless, of course, God is being patient and merciful with us. God wants to partner with those of us who are willing, asking us to care like he does so that, like us, the enemies and the unbelievers might be converted. God waits for awakening, and perhaps for us to help with the conversions.

In any case, lots of people were waiting for the Messiah to come, but nobody was waiting for *God’s* Messiah. We were waiting for a Messiah according to our own ideas of what the Messiah should be like, how the Messiah should behave, and what the Messiah should do. In other words, despite all the prophecies and all the rhetoric,

many people were not ready for the long-expected Messiah who came. They were unable to recognize or deal with a Messiah who requested cooperation instead of forcing submission. Whatever the reasons, a lot of people were not ready or willing to face the drastic changes that would occur if Jesus was declared King and set over the affairs of the nation.

There was a lot of resistance, especially from the leaders who would be deposed, or at least set under the authority of Jesus and His very different understanding of the precepts and principles of God's Kingdom. That of course includes us all. We are all deposed if we let Jesus into our lives: We cannot eat what we want, drink what we want, sleep where we want, spend or save our money like we want, use our lives like we want. Later, to be sure, we discover that the New WAY – Life with Jesus – has us doing all these things more like we always dreamed we could do and have truly *wanted* to do, but that does not help us very much on the way in, from the far side of conversion.

The leaders and structures of the nation of Israel increasingly saw Jesus as a threat to their positions and their way of life, and they were right. Indeed He was. Jesus was a threat to Israel's entire way of life. Confusion and passion and consternation were rampant. Respected leaders of authority and reputation were determined to discredit and oppose Jesus, and Jesus was no longer willing to back off or stay on the fringe. People who liked Jesus but were not sure about Him were caught in a terrible crossfire. People with good friends on both sides were embroiled in mental and emotional anguish. Which side do you choose when you love both sides and reconciliation is no longer possible? That is what happened to Judas, by the way, and it killed him. But most everybody was caught in it one way or another.

Legitimate human structures do not kill people unless they become a terrible threat. Jesus is a threat to every human's way of life. That's the problem, is it not? Do we want to be in control of our lives, or do we want Jesus to be? What is the fastest way to "kill" Jesus today on an individual level? Of course: ignore Him. All of us spend considerable energy making sure Jesus does not get any greater influence in our lives. He is prominent enough in our history and culture that we have to take deliberate steps to stop Him from getting any closer or any more influential. We find many subtle and not-so-subtle ways to do that – everything from ridicule to just acting too busy. Too busy to have time for the Son of God? Can we actually believe our

excuses? Talk about denial! And not all of us, but many of us play endless games with our spiritual disciplines. We move earnestly toward tithing to our church for twenty-five years and never get any closer. How many of us have more allegiance toward watching a ball game than we do toward worshipping with our faith family? Some of us have even learned to study and write books and sermons about Jesus as a way to ignore Him. God keeps trying to love us, but, convinced that this will mess up our lives too much, we turn a cold shoulder and find endless ways to ignore God.

You may think I am trying to make you feel guilty, but I know better than most that guilt cannot help us. *Awareness* sometimes helps, but guilt only cuts our energy. Love and gratitude can help us. Grace and forgiveness can help us. Guilt and shame always betray us into Satan's hands. However, letting go of our excuses and looking at our lives as they really are *can* still lead to repentance. And repentance can take us straight into the arms of the Holy Spirit.

* * *

Back to Palm Sunday: Jesus was through being cautious about His purpose and His real identity. He was not going to leave any more doubt in anybody's mind. Some would accept Him and some would reject Him, but Jesus declared His true identity in no uncertain terms. He came into Jerusalem in regal procession, in the prophetic manner, as the Messiah and Rightful King of Israel. What He was doing and claiming was crystal clear to everybody there, whether they loved Him or hated Him. He was acting like the King. He was claiming to be the King. He was telling all Jerusalem (which at Passover time was all Israel) that He was the Messiah and that the Messiah had arrived, and that it was therefore right, necessary, and essential to proceed with the coronation.

Yes, friends: Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday declaring, "I am the true King, and I want the crown – NOW!" Jesus had closed down all other options. He was ready to take over the leadership of the nation. If the authorities allowed Jesus to sustain His claim through Passover, it would happen. Jesus forced the issue. It is essential for us to know that. They had to coronate Him or kill Him. Jesus left them no other choice.

The story is familiar. I know you know it well. But on Palm Sunday these many years later, it is still possible to know the parts and not add it up to the whole. On top of that, some people are still

trying to tell us that Jesus' followers made up His identity after He was dead – that Jesus never made any strong statements about His own true identity. That is ludicrous, to be sure. But if you are willing, let's add it up again:

1.) Jesus prearranges and stages this Palm Sunday scene on purpose. He has worked on it and planned it carefully for a long time. He sends His followers into every town and village in Palestine to tell people to meet Him in Jerusalem at Passover for this event. I mention it quickly, but this is essential: eighty-four disciples are sent out with the message. (You can find it in the ninth and tenth chapters of Luke.) He then carefully avoids arrest, managing somehow to elude the authorities all the way from Galilee to Jerusalem.

2.) Jesus has prearranged the use of an ass's colt. At this point, He could not go get it Himself in broad daylight without crowds of supporters around Him, and He would have been arrested. On Palm Sunday itself, there would be too much confusion and too little time. So He sends friends to get the colt, and the colt is waiting for them. The prearranged password is "*The Lord has need of it.*" (Matthew 21:1-3; Mark 11:1-3; Luke 19:28-31)

The ass's colt is a powerful symbol. All Israel knows its significance. It comes from a prophecy in the Book of Zechariah: "*Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass.*" (Zechariah 9:9 RSV) Jesus is determined to fulfill this prophecy in broad daylight and on purpose, and in front of the Passover crowds that are gathering from all over the known world.

3.) The crowds on Palm Sunday know exactly what Jesus is doing – what He is acting out, what He is proclaiming. This is no accidental uproar. They are enacting the prophecy with Him, quoting and claiming the meaning of the 118th Psalm. That is, they are making a formal procession to the temple with the King. The temple is, among other things, the place where you coronate the King. Psalm 118 reads in part: "*Please, Yahweh, please save us!* [That phrase, translated back into Hebrew, sounds something like "HOSANNA!"] *Please, Yahweh, please give us prosperity. Blessings on him who comes in the name of Yahweh! We bless you from the house of Yahweh. Yahweh is God, he smiles on us. With branches in your hands, draw up in procession as far as the horns of the altar. You are my God, I give you thanks, I extol you, my God; I give you thanks for having heard me, you have been my*

savior. Give thanks to Yahweh, for he is good, his love is everlasting!" (Psalm 118:25-29 JB) Sometimes we think life is accidental or that things are a coincidence. Palm Sunday is not one of those times. Jesus could not make His proclamation any more clear.

4.) So the people line Jesus' path with their garments, as symbol of welcome *and* submission (obedience) – the willing acceptance of His Kingship. They throw palm branches also, symbol of royalty and the celebration of victory. They come in full procession down the Mount of Olives, across the Kidron Valley, in through the Golden Gate, and straight into the temple square. There is no doubt or confusion in the scene at this point. They are welcoming a victorious King into Jerusalem, and they are declaring that this King is the long-awaited Messiah. Everything is clear and ready and in place – except for the swords.

The Pharisees object strenuously. They are not confused about what is happening, even if some modern readers are. They are saying: "Teacher, restrain your disciples! This is inexcusable and intolerable, and you know it!" If Jesus is not the Messiah, then all of this is pure blasphemy. The Pharisees know it, and everybody there knows it. But Jesus will not restrain His disciples because He knows He IS the Messiah. "*If these were silent, the very stones would cry out,*" He replies.

5.) The procession goes straight to the temple square (courtyard). Once there, Jesus purifies the temple area by throwing out the money-changers. It is an act of authority – the authority of a King (who is also a new High Priest): "I am in charge here – clean this place up!" By the way, Jesus does not object to the fact that money-changers are there; having money-changers at the temple is helpful. People traveling to Jerusalem for Passover need an animal to sacrifice on the altar. Many of them need to purchase an animal when they get there; others bring an animal with them but need to exchange it for an animal without blemish. The money-changers are needed. Jesus' objection is to the fact that they are cheating the people in the exchanges.

Sometimes we ask: How did Jesus get away with this? Why did the money-changers leave? Why didn't the temple police arrest Him right there and then for disturbing the peace? Or for blasphemy? This offense was enough to have Jesus stoned, if they had enough support to manage it.

Try to picture it: None of this takes place inside a building. The altar is not inside the temple building – what a mess that would be! Priests do go inside the temple building for supplies, to keep the lamps burning, and to keep things nice for God (as they suppose). But people do not come to worship inside the temple. Most of them have never seen the inside of the temple building and never will. The people, the sacrifices, the sacred meals, the prayers, and the gatherings are all going on in the temple square outside the temple building itself. There are porticoes in the wall surrounding the outer rim of the temple square, and in them are tables for money-changers and for people who are selling things. You can purchase a lamb, a dove, vegetables, grain, or oil for the sacrificial meals.

So Jesus walks into the temple square, brandishes the whip He has made of cords, and declares: “*It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’ but you have made it into a cave of thieves. Get out!*” (Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-17; Luke 19:45-46) So if you are one of the money-changers, what do you do? Do you say, “Go away and don’t bother us”? Are you going to call the temple police? What about the few thousand wildly enthusiastic followers who have come streaming into the temple square right behind Jesus, and who now stretch out through the gates as far as you can see? I think you would decide to leave. Fifteen or twenty temple police are not going to take on a crowd of thousands of supporters. (Some miracles are easier to explain than others.)

The point is, Jesus is declaring His identity and claiming His authority and His right to rule Israel. But there is more.

6.) The existing authorities – Herod, Caiaphas, the Sanhedrin – do not accept Jesus’ claim, of course. But Jesus has assumed His new role and He will not let it rest. He is back at the temple every day, with His followers, acting like the new King. The temple, remember, is the political as well as religious center of the nation. Jesus is acting like the King, and His followers are declaring Him to be the new and Rightful King. All Jerusalem is buzzing with excitement. The Chief Priests want to know by what authority Jesus is acting in this outlandish manner: “Who gives you the authority to act like our King?” Jesus replies, in effect: “God gives me this authority, but you will not accept it.” (Matthew 21:23-27; Mark 11:28-33; Luke 20:2-8)

The tension and the confrontation between Jesus and the authorities mount daily from Palm Sunday to Maundy Thursday.

CORONATION DAY

Jesus pushes them to the wall. He will be coronated as King ... or killed. He will have it no other way. He leaves them with no other choice. Jesus has no other choice either. If you are the Rightful King and you walk away, the destiny closes down. That leaves only one other choice: kill your enemies. Our world *still* thinks using military might (a rebellion, an uprising) is the only choice for a true king. But Jesus chooses a different WAY. It is a very rare thing in our world: To honestly invite people to choose you because they believe in you. And to be willing to suffer the consequences if they do not. This was Jesus' choice. He chose it then; He chooses it still. "I will be your King if and when you choose me to be your King. Then and only then can you know my Kingdom or know what it is like to have me as your King."

* * *

As well as being a historical event, Palm Sunday has become a classic theme in Western lore and literature: The Usurpers take over the throne and rule without wisdom or vision or compassion, and for their own self-interest or aggrandizement. The Rightful King is hidden or unknown, but the Rightful King has true wisdom and real love for his people. Life is hard, and getting worse, for the people. To feed the needs and desires of the few, the planet has been set on a course of self-destruct. Yet few understand, and none really know what to do about it. Some dream and long for the day when the Rightful King will appear and set things right. Then one day the Rightful King comes onto the scene in disguise. But the Usurpers are always watching, hoping to discover and kill the Rightful King before he can regain the throne.

In the stories of the Greeks, in our fairy tales, in the legends of King Arthur, Robin Hood, and King Richard the Lion-Hearted, Palm Sunday is reenacted and retold over and over, usually with a happy ending. In real life, it has no happy ending. People are still afraid of existing authority – of life as they have known it – and with good reason. People with earthly authority are not afraid to use weapons, to use military might, or to kill those in opposition. So the followers and supporters of the True King are soon weakened, discouraged, and scattered. They believe the lies, or they get talked out of or tricked out of allegiance to the Rightful King. So the Rightful King is deposed or disposed of yet again, and life goes back to its normal dreary round.

* * *

CORONATION DAY

Some of us never really ponder Palm Sunday very deeply. The events of Holy Week – Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and Easter – are so powerful and compelling that Palm Sunday gets overshadowed, lost in the backwash of much greater affairs. But why does Jesus go to all this trouble? What difference does it make to stage this Palm Sunday parade when it will be so quickly lost in far greater defeats and victories?

Palm Sunday is an absolutely necessary part of the drama. What would have happened to our faith if there had been no Palm Sunday? Do we know anything about ourselves – about our denial or our mendacity? Without Palm Sunday we would quickly claim that if we had ever been given the chance, we would gladly have declared Jesus our King; we would have been there for Him; we would have supported Him and backed Him up all the way. Oh absolutely! No doubt about it! But we were never given the chance.

So Jesus gives us the chance. He authentically offers to be our Leader. All it takes is our free-will decision to accept Him as our King. He will not coerce. He will not stage a military takeover. We have to *want* Him for our King; want Him more than any other leader in our lives; want Him to be in charge of our lives even more than we want to run our lives ourselves. All through our lives, lots of others offer to run our lives for us, with or without our consent. And they will be sad or angry or sometimes even livid if we choose Jesus instead of them.

So the palms are waved, the cloaks are strewn before Him, and He rides through the Golden Gate into Jerusalem with the crowds going wild. But five *days* later, Jesus is dead. When the chips are down, He dies alone, betrayed and deserted by all His friends. He dies alone, without a single friend to support or stand with Him. Without Palm Sunday, we never would have believed it. Without Palm Sunday, the dynamics of real life on earth would never have been made clear to us.

* * *

My life is always easy and pleasant in comparison to Jesus' life. Some people do not like me, but few hate me as much as they hated Him. Without Palm Sunday, we cannot understand the rest. Without Palm Sunday, we would never believe the depths of our desertion or the shallowness of our initial promises. If we have never heard the cock crow, we know little about the Christian Faith and what it really means to choose and follow Jesus.

CORONATION DAY

In each new generation, Jesus waits to be crowned or killed. With every person born into our world, Jesus waits to be crowned or killed. We can still have Life under His rulership and placed at His disposal. There is nothing this world can do to prevent that, if we decide to give our allegiance and our lives to Him.

In any case, on Palm Sunday many years ago, Jesus stopped fooling around. He came out from behind all the hints and parables and innuendo. He declared His true identity. He proclaimed it in the clearest, most dramatic way possible: “I am the long-expected One ... the Messiah ... your True and Rightful King ... the One sent from Heaven to lead you into prosperity and peace and the fullness of God’s plan for you – into the Kingdom that has no end. I am the ONE you prayed for. Receive me and crown me your King.”

Coronation or Crucifixion: claim Him or kill Him. Sooner or later, we realize that He leaves us with no other choice.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THIS DOCUMENT AND ANY RECORDING
ARE DUE TO COMBINING REWORKED VERSIONS OF THIS SERMON
INTO ONE DEFINITIVE TEXT VERSION.

SUPPLEMENT I

Palm Sunday changes everything. The long-awaited Messiah comes. But instead of the world being transformed, the world crucifies Him. Not only does that kill Jesus, it is the death of all Old Testament / Old Covenant hopes and dreams. For those of us who believe that Jesus is the Messiah, this means the Kingdom cannot come, nor will it ever be established by military might. No outward political revolution or coup (*coup d'état*) ever can or ever will usher in the Kingdom. How can I get my mind to wrap around that?

The New Covenant in Jesus' blood is "new" indeed! "*Behold, I am making all things new.*" (Revelation 21:5) After Palm Sunday, everything looks different, at least to Christians. Everything has blurred – gone out of focus – and then come back into sharp relief in a different way and place. The words of our language have different meanings; methodology is altered; what it means to be faithful, what it means to love, what it means to be successful or victorious – everything has changed. (I read Second Corinthians 5:14-17 again and again and no longer try to recover from the message.)

We die to this world, and it means that everything we formerly trusted, hoped in, and tried to work for goes into this enormous transition – this transformation. We go into total despair and die literally, or we find ourselves lifted into a New Life. We call it "conversion." Death and Resurrection is not just a story about Jesus; it is also in some way the story of every follower, the story of everyone who believes in Jesus, the story of everyone who believes Jesus is truly God's Messiah. Death and Resurrection is our story now too.

Palm Sunday is the continental divide between our realm and God's realm. Our conscious awareness keeps shifting; it keeps spiraling upward. Is it Moses, or Jesus? Is it Sabbath, or Sunday? Is it King David, or King Jesus? Is it physical reality, or spiritual reality? Is it an outside job, or an inside job? Is it Law, or Gospel? Is it judgment, or grace? Is it "kill our enemies," or keep hoping and praying for their awakening and redemption?

Jesus had to be Jewish because the Jews hoped in God beyond all others. You cannot transform the concept of Messiah in a culture that does not believe in or wait for Messiah to come. Since Abraham, Judaism had been struggling for two thousand years with its Covenant and waiting for God's promises to be fulfilled. They also believed that

CORONATION DAY

God was waiting for them to fulfill *their* side of the bargain – to keep their side of the Covenant.

But Palm Sunday changed everything. Messiah came. And instead of transforming the world and fulfilling God's promises, the world crucified the Messiah. Jesus handed us a clear choice. Without that choice, we never would have understood; we never would have believed that we would reject the True and Rightful King. But we did! That remains a profound and crucial part of the story. It is a missing link for many Christians. "Oh, I love God; always have. And I have always been on God's side." "Of course. Just like all the rest of us." Palm Sunday pulls away all the veils and subterfuge of sin, denial, and pretense.

SUPPLEMENT II

It is a historic fact that in Jesus' time, most Jews would not switch to the New King. That is completely understandable. For so many generations, their hope had been in and for a Kingdom of this world. Even though this hope kept growing dimmer and further from reality, still they could not give it up. A king in David's line would come to restore their earthly position of prominence, success, and prosperity. The Psalms and the Prophets claim this hope and this scenario, and they claim that this is the will and plan of God. They claim this hope will be realized in a physical, this-world reality. They make this much clearer than most of us want to notice or bother to realize.

The Psalms *expect* God to be actively just in this world, to right the wrongs, to punish the evildoers and vindicate the righteous. The Prophets rail at the people of Israel, telling them that their problems and their plight are a direct punishment from God because they did not keep the Covenant. Their message is: Return to faithfulness – keep the Covenant – and your earthly fortunes will be restored. God will send a new king in David's line, and you will again become the most successful and powerful nation on earth. This is the Old Testament hope and dream. Don't take my word for it; read the book.

That is why Palm Sunday changes everything. The Old Covenant still believes and hopes in the rewards and promises of this physical realm. As those hopes recede, the people try harder and harder to believe that someday God will send a Messiah – a Righteous King – who will be God's agent to restore the promises and fulfill all their hopes and dreams. But Jesus came with a very different promise and a very different plan: *"My Kingdom is not of this world."* Most Jews turned away in disgust or dismay. Within a few generations, most Christians were switching back to the former hopes and dreams as well. Oh, they did not or could not admit that they no longer believed in Jesus, so they reworked their expectations of Jesus and turned everything back into the old familiar "King David" scenario. This time Jesus would come riding in on the clouds of Heaven, with angels all around Him, and He would smite all opposition and set up His faithful followers according to all the former expectations. How nice: Now they could ignore the real Jesus and pretend He had never come with a New Covenant or a New Gospel. And so the church no longer has to

struggle to comprehend the real nature of sin, the need for true conversion, or how to deal with the goodness or the evil that exists within us all.

Is that okay with us? Is it okay with us to miss it again? Palm Sunday changes everything. Jesus is a new kind of King, and Jesus invites us into a new kind of Kingdom. The King, the Kingdom, the hope, the faith – they are not of this world. They are here but they have come from a different dimension, and they invite us to live in and for a different dimension.

This new hope burned brightly for Peter and Paul, for James and John. After the Resurrection and Pentecost, they switched all their hopes to a different King and to a different Kingdom. They “died to this world” spiritually, and often physically when the world challenged their faith and pushed it. The different King was ever with them. *“I will be with you always”* He guided and strengthened them, He loved and inspired them – but closer and more real than any human form could have managed. The world could not arrest or crucify or persecute or silence the might of the Holy Spirit’s love and grace and forgiveness. The Holy Spirit is the Resurrected Jesus. Only a handful of Christians seem to know this.

No more waiting! The battle between light and darkness goes on. We lose many rounds. Yet every time someone is loved, forgiven, awakened, accepted, welcomed into the unseen Kingdom, we are winning. Nobody needs to remind us to weep about all the times we are losing.

Palm Sunday reveals the ultimate and inevitable failure of the Old Covenant and all of its hopes and dreams. Jesus had to show us the bankruptcy of the Old Way, that we might finally choose a New WAY. Indeed it is a hard Way, coming always through death and resurrection. But it is an authentic Way. And no other Way is.

SUPPLEMENT III

Many of you who read and love the Psalms today automatically dub-in a perspective the Psalms do not have or hold. You know that the promise is delayed and that, in your own experience, God does not always back the good guys, just as God did not always back the good guys then. So you shift it into a future hope. Clearly or vaguely you put it on hold – you put your hope off for some later time. But do you ever add it up or look at it clearly? What do you truly expect, in this broken realm? Lots of my Christian friends tell me they don't really think much about Heaven. So are their hopes actually in this present world?

If I am a good person, truly moral, and conscientious; if I work hard, study hard, stay honest, prove myself generous and caring – will I be successful in this present time and world? Our behavior does have consequences; I have a better chance of knowing some success here if I live on these terms than I do if I am a shiftless, lying, greedy, self-centered cheat. But are there any guarantees? Do any of you know conscientious, hard-working, moral people who are not very successful in this world?

What if I had been born in 1923 instead of 1934? Would my morality or my piety have saved me from a death-march in Burma or from any of the other horrors of World War II? A whole generation of individuals, from every land, was sucked into the maelstrom of that war. How many individuals have been drawn into the unpleasant consequences of our recent recession? No just God that we can detect is separating the sheep from the goats in the tides and storms of this present world.

So we have reverted to our former ways of thinking: “Never mind following Jesus in the here and now. Wait for Him to come again and set everything right. Then we will be victorious. Meanwhile, back to business as usual. Go to church on Sunday and wait it out.” Now many of us have revised it yet again: “We are all really spiritual people, so we don't even have to go to church on Sunday. God automatically loves us, so never mind where all the mayhem is coming from. You are saved if you recycle and say good things about the importance of the environment.”

At times we go through cycles of hope that make us think we may be okay after all. The cancer is in remission; the alcoholic is drinking less; the philandering or abusive husband is really sorry – maybe we don't need Jesus after all. From the 1700s to the early 1900s, many very sincere and committed Christians (our immediate forebears in the mainline churches) actually believed that we were on the verge of a nearly utopian society. Without most people realizing it, this was a resurgence of the Old Covenant dream of success and prosperity on earth. Science was solving the mysteries of life. (Sherlock Holmes was the popular symbol of it; there was a logical explanation for everything.) Medicine was finding cures for all our diseases. Education was spreading across the world, chasing back ignorance and superstition – and with it, the darkness that was responsible for most evil. It was widely assumed that an educated person would choose the good, the right, the true. After all, it was really stupid not to.

Clearly much was still wrong, but reform was everywhere. As good people banded together and more and more of us saw the light, we would abolish crime, disease, poverty, economic injustice. We would work in increasing harmony with God and with nature. This hope inspired great efforts and sometimes great sacrifices. It built churches and hospitals and universities. It built scouting programs and YMCAs everywhere. It supported vast missions to most parts of the globe. It built what today we cannot even imagine maintaining. But of course, we can no longer imagine the hope that inspired it.

I can no longer pretend that my level of development is good enough for the kind of world I would like to live in. I still carry too much anger, fear, loneliness, and rebellion within me. Nor can I imagine that my fellow Christians will get together – or get good enough, wise enough, or inspired enough – to bring peace and prosperity to everyone in the world.

Hell, I cannot even imagine what we are going to do with all the plastic and toxic waste choking nature's renewal systems. I do not see how we are going to save the birds, solve the energy crisis, or deal with the increasing animosity between nations and religions and economic classes.

By the way, my eighteenth- and nineteenth-century counterparts had concluded that Satan was a myth, just symbolic language for ignorance, greed, and lack of cooperation. But I think Satan is back, laughing harder than ever, and twisting nations, corporations, and endless individuals around his little finger.

Oh, Satan has not won it all. We still see ways and places and people who are not willing to be his agents. There still is a power and a person mightier than Satan. As Luther said, “Christ Jesus, it is he!” But Luther came before the great awakening. He never learned to put his hopes on the perfection of humans or human society in the first place.

SUPPLEMENT IV

On a different level, of course, there is the part of the Palm Sunday story that is still open and dramatic and alive today. The story has not ended. Jesus still waits, with each new generation, to be crowned or killed. Crying “*Hosanna!*” can still mean what it is supposed to mean. It can still mean accepting the True King. It can still mean Life under His rulership and placed at His disposal. We can only do that one person at a time, but we can still mean it and live for it ourselves in our own lives. The ending to Palm Sunday is still open. That’s the reason we go on remembering Palm Sunday. It is a day still waiting to happen. There are people in the world who will cry “*Hosanna!*” today for the first time and mean it. For them, Palm Sunday will be true, and it will become their truth for the rest of their lives. Jesus is King!

A whole nation could do it too, of course. The possibility is there – the option is still open. And in truth, the chaos will continue here – the Usurpers will continue to rule and make things miserable for all of us – *until* that happens. Until that happens, we and our brothers and sisters everywhere will go on living in an alienated world that does not know its Rightful King or its own true destiny or potential – until we get the story straight and do Palm Sunday right. Jesus did it right. We do not need a “Second Coming” – WE are the ones who have not done it right yet. But the option is open at any time. Jesus has seen to that. Palm Sunday is still a day waiting to happen.

Yes, we have all heard about Palm Sunday for as far back as we can remember. But its meaning and its calling and its urgency are still with us, just as wide open as it has ever been. Our Lord still awaits His coronation. And the Lord does not rule where He is not chosen. He grants us that freedom. He will not move very strongly in our world until He is freely chosen and duly installed – with all the rights, privileges, and authority that go with the office. Palm Sunday is still very much with us. Every “least brother” who is unjustly treated or undone or left out by the earthly systems reminds us that the coronation of the Rightful King has not yet taken place. Every “least brother” who finds no task or vocatio or who is too lazy or unethical or irresponsible or depressed to help with the load – the business of Life that we all share – also reminds us that the coronation of the Rightful King has not yet taken place.

* * *

And there is one thing some people still miss when they consider Palm Sunday. When Jesus declared Himself in that fashion, it pushed the rest of us to the wall. There was and is no escaping it. That proclamation forces the rest of us to declare who we are, too. When somebody tries to take over the world, we all get drawn into it. If the attempt to take over the world lasts for very long, we all end up taking sides. We are for it or against it. We want the new regime or we fight to defend the old one. And Jesus will not leave it alone. He keeps coming back, pressing the issue, forcing the choice. He wants Kingship! He means to have it. He wants all the support and all the loyal followers He can get. Some people do not seem to know that about sweet Jesus.

Only, that is the most obvious thing about the whole story. None of the rest of the story makes any sense until we know that. Jesus is trying to take over the world! He was then and He is now. And Jesus leaves no middle ground for any of us. He still forces the choice, just as He always has. We try to help Him take over the world, or we end up fighting against Him. Palm Sunday is every day of our lives. And Jesus says: “Here I am. This is who I am. This is ME! Who are YOU? Are you awake? Do you know you are? Are you with me or against me?”

His proclamation forces us to declare ourselves. And we do that every day, one way or another.

“Hosanna!” Or, *“Get HIM out of here!”*

SUPPLEMENT V

Jesus' story is both fascinating and confusing because the plot is always going on at two different levels. There is the earthly drama and there is the spiritual drama. Jesus takes both levels seriously and works in both simultaneously. There is the earthly Kingdom and there is the heavenly Kingdom. Forget the heavenly Kingdom for a little while today, and concentrate on what Jesus is trying to do on earth. The whole drama on both levels will come a lot clearer if we can manage to do that. Palm Sunday is the day of truth – the high moment and culmination of Jesus' earthly ministry. (First-level plot. Subject: Jesus' role, influence, and authority on earth.)

* * *

For most of us, the most fascinating dimension to Palm Sunday is wondering what would have happened if Jesus had been coronated instead of killed. What would have happened if everyone in Israel had joined the triumphal procession, crowned Jesus King, and then declared themselves ready, willing, and available to be His loyal subjects? What sort of transformation would have taken place in the affairs of the nation if Jesus had become the undisputed King? I keep hoping somebody will write an imaginative story for us. Start out with chapter nineteen, verse forty-one, and tell the story like it might have been – like it should have happened. It could be called *Ten Years After Palm Sunday – A New Nation*.

But we do not have to write a book; we can join a church. The church, you see, exists and is dedicated to living out Palm Sunday like it should have happened. We no longer wait for the Second Coming; that's part of the Old Way of thinking and hoping. Instead we choose Jesus as our King NOW and join a church. Oh, we do not join buildings of brick and mortar; that too is part of the Old Way. We join house churches, faith families – small communities of believers with whom we can practice *in all our affairs* the principles Jesus taught us. In such churches, people gather to swear allegiance to the Rightful King, and to live with Him and for Him no matter what the world decides about Him.