

“The Beginning Of The End”

Dear friends, Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus as we find ourselves on the front-end of this most Holy Week in the life of the church. What happened during those final days of Jesus' life are, without question, the most important events this world has ever seen. They not only shape the witness of the scriptures and the relevance of the Church's message to the world, but also they form and inform the life of every person who has ever lived.

Take a look at the gospels sometime (I know we've talked about this before) and add up the number of chapters dedicated to that final week of Jesus' life; four differing accounts given to us in the Bible. What you'll find is that nearly one out of every three chapters, of those gospel stories of Jesus' life, is given to what happened during those final days.

How come? Because what happened during those final days is what Jesus' life on this earth was all about. What happened during those final days is what makes Jesus' life of eternal importance to you and to me. They changed the world forever. They changed the history of our world forever. And they can and will and do have the power to change your life.

Today is a day (as we all know) that has come to be known as Palm Sunday. It's a day when we remember how Jesus rode into Jerusalem to the shouts and the cries of the people, waving branches cut from the trees. Their hopes for a king were riding on Jesus. Their desires for one who would free them from the oppression of Rome were placed upon Christ. And so, they welcomed him. They shouted out for him. They were willing (and ready) to do anything for him, for this one who was to become the culmination of their dreams.

Today is also a day referred to as Passion Sunday. It's the beginning of a week in which we remember the passion (or the suffering) that Jesus experienced during his final hours. In many churches, the story of Jesus' passion (as told in the gospels) is read as the sermon. Two or three or four chapters of Scripture become the sermon in many churches. The story of his passion is what drives this day.

Now, we don't have that tradition here (at St. Timothy's). In contrast, we walk through the passion of Jesus (and those same chapters) in the Bible on Thursday and Friday nights of this holy week. We live them and re-live them as we hear the same stories (on those same nights) each year of what Jesus has done and accomplished for us.

The Bible says that all of the sins of the world were laid on Jesus when he went to the cross. It says that all the suffering that you and I deserved was given to him. And it came at a cost. It came with a price. The price he paid was his life, and the cost was nothing less than his suffering and death.

It was the beginning of the end on that first Palm Sunday when Jesus rode into Jerusalem. It was the start to a number of things that would come to a close on that first day of this most holy week.

Now, obviously that wasn't as apparent to the crowd that day (looking forward) as it is to us (looking back). To them (as we've said) it was a glorious day. It was day of high hopes and expectation. The people cut branches, laid their garments on the road, and shouted "Hosanna" to the one who was to become their king.

And that's exactly what happened during that week. Jesus became their King. (He became our King.) But not before going to his death. And not before his life on this earth came to an end.

It was the beginning of the end to Jesus' life. Thirty three years is what he had on this earth. From the time he was born (in Bethlehem) to the time he was nailed to that tree. Not a long life. Not a life running its natural course. But a life that was full and a life that had meaning and a life that ran the course it was given.

Jesus said, "No one takes my life from me." He said, "I give it up willingly." And he did. And it came to an end. Thirty three years and it had all come and gone.

Just think about the events of that week, the events of Jesus' life. His closest friends? By the time that week was over, one betrayed him. One denied him. The others (all but) ran away. And the things he taught and he did? (Not even Pilate could find a crime.) But he ended up on a cross.

Now, this isn't central to the story, but if that's all you and I had, all we knew about (whoever it was) living only (thirty-three years), we'd think of their life as cut short, as somehow coming to a tragic end. Even for Jesus, thirty-three years is not a long time, no matter how you come at it; and especially (when you consider) how he was such a gifted teacher and miracle-worker and leader. From the perspective of (this life) it was a short life and it was cut-short life and the ending was tragic...for this life.

Thankfully (for Jesus), it wasn't for just (this life) that he lived. And wasn't for just (this life) that he died. And that's what made the difference.

Now, let me ask you a question. (And, again, this isn't central to the story.) How long do you think you will live? And what kind of life-perspective are you taking while you're here? This week is not about you, but it affects you. It's not about me (or about us), but it impacts us all.

I read an interesting article (a while back), talking about the life expectancy people have for themselves and how they approach life based upon how long they think they might live. And it was contrasting (in the article) the approach of the (general population) with the approach of those claiming to be followers of Christ.

It said the average person in the United States today expects to live into their seventies or eighties or perhaps even beyond. And it said the decisions they make and the priorities they set are based almost entirely upon how long they expect to live.

Now, on the one hand, that's not a bad thing. I'm sure (in many ways), we all do it. In fact, even for the Christian, it's a good approach to life, a responsible way to live. Regardless of how long it might be, it's important that we plan and be prepared and (be ready) for whatever length of life God might give. (It's all good.)

But it went on to say (and this was the part that caught my attention) that the decisions people make and the priorities they set (regardless of their religious connection) were not that much different. It said there was little significant difference between the priorities and values of the (general population) and those claiming to be followers of Jesus Christ.

Now, I don't want to read too much into that study, nor into its findings. At the same time, I don't want us to miss the point. Because once you become a follower of Jesus, your life on this earth has to change. Your life on this earth has changed. It's different as a disciple. It's not the same as it once was. And if anything made that clear, it was the final week of Jesus' life.

Remember what our Lord taught his disciples? Remember what he teaches us? He says, "Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow." And he says, "If you want to save your life, then lose it. If you want your life to continue, then give it up and let it go." And he says, "If it costs you your life, then it costs you your life." If it means you need to sacrifice, then you need to sacrifice. But don't think you can faithfully follow without being willing and ready to change.

You tell me. How long do you think you're going to live? How much time do you think you have? Thirty-three years? A hundred and thirty-three years?

As a Christian? As a follower of Jesus? I'll tell you how long you're going to live. You're going to live forever. Your life's going to keep on going, even when (in this life) it comes to an end. Your life is never going to stop. It's never going to end. And so stop living, (Jesus says), like it will and start setting priorities that are going to last.

It was the beginning of the end when Jesus rode into Jerusalem: the end to his life on this earth, and the end to any dreams of an earthly kingdom.

Now, I wasn't there on that first Palm Sunday and neither were you. But it's not hard to imagine that there were hopes (that day) of a kingdom that was going to last. After all, Jesus was the Messiah. And that's what the Messiah was going to do. He was going to establish his kingdom. He was going to move into power and take control. And he did. And his kingdom is still in effect. But not as the people had hoped.

Remember Jesus' words when he stood before Pilate? He said, "My kingdom is not of this world." He said, "If it were of this world, my disciples would fight. But it's not," he said, "and so they won't" and perhaps (that's why) so few were left.

It's an interesting study, if you begin looking through the gospels, why it was Jesus attracted such a large following. There were a lot of things that drew people to Jesus: a good teacher, a good preacher. He had some interesting and insightful approaches to life.

Do you know what the main reason was that people followed? Do you know the primary reason people were attracted to Christ? The primary attraction (he had) was his power. The reason they followed was because of his miracles, because of the things he was able to do, and because of the possibility that someday and (in some way) he would also become the one in control.

It's an interesting study in the gospels, if you start looking at what happens. I went back this past week and counted. Now, maybe I missed a few, but I think I have it right.

Did you know that there were no miracles performed during that final week of Jesus' life (with the one exception) of when Peter cut off the ear of that soldier and Jesus put it back? (It's true.) I went back and looked. There are 52 miracles recorded in the gospels, 52 times when Jesus performed a miracle (or miracles), but not one of them (with that one exception) during that final week.

Do you know what there was instead? In place of the miracles of Jesus, do you know what we find? We find a never-ending call for commitment. We find a message (from Jesus) that takes as seriously as ever before the responsibility (in the calling) to commit your life to him.

Look through the story yourself. Thirty-one of the eighty-nine chapters in the four gospels combined are dedicated to the final week of Jesus' life, but there's only one miracle in all of those chapters.

Instead, there's a story of a rich man who wanted to know how to be saved. Jesus told him to sell his riches and to give them all away and to follow. But he couldn't and so he didn't, and he walked away.

There's the story of a fig tree that didn't bear any figs. (Remember that story?) Jesus cursed it and it died, and he talked about living a fruitful life and how that might happen.

Then there's the parable of the two sons. (Remember them?) The one said he would, but he didn't. The other said he wouldn't, but he did. Jesus said it's the one who does the will of the Father (and not just talks about it and says it) who will end up in the kingdom.

Then there's that great commandment to "love God and to love your neighbor" above everything else, including yourself. Then there's the teaching to "always be diligent and on the watch, because you never know when the hour will come."

And then there's the judgment story with the sheep and the goats. And then there's the parable of the wicked tenants who wanted to kill the heir...and it keeps on going.

Just that one miracle in thirty-one of the eighty-nine chapters in the gospels, but story after story (after story) calling for nothing less than a total commitment from those who would choose to follow Christ. No wonder the crowds began to go away. No wonder there were only a few left at the foot of the cross.

It's an interesting study, the things that drew people to Jesus. It's an even more interesting and important question for each of us. This isn't (the first) Palm Sunday, when the people (who were there) didn't know what was coming (later in the week) and they all left. This is Passion Sunday and we (who are here) all (do know) what is coming (later in the week) and where it leads and what Jesus did.

You tell me. On the first day on this most Holy Week, a time in the (life of the Church) when we remember and re-live those final events of Jesus' life. Where are you at in your commitment to follow Jesus? What is it that attracts you to this One who was the "hoped-for" king who would take control in this life?

Have you given him control (of your life), without any earthly promise for a kingdom? Have you allowed him control (in your life), knowing that it might come (to your life) at a cost?

It was the beginning of the end on that Palm Sunday. The end to Jesus' earthly life, the end to any dreams of an earthly kingdom, and the end to the work Jesus came to accomplish.

Years ago there was a book written about President Woodrow Wilson and the years he was in office titled, "When the Cheering Stopped." It was the story of what happened to his presidency during the events leading up to and following the end of the First World War.

If you know that history, you know that when the war finally came to an end, President Wilson was an international hero. Everywhere he went, there were crowds of people who cheered what he had accomplished.

But if you know that history, you know also that within a year of the war coming to an end, the cheering began to stop and his support began to crumble. And in the next election, not only was he not re-elected, but his party when down in a big defeat.

Now, it was a much different story with Jesus; not even close to being the same. He had (as we've said) no intention of building an earthly kingdom. And there were no political aspirations (of any kind) and (at any

time) in our Lord's life. But it was a similar story in that this man who was cheered by the crowds on Palm Sunday was jeered by those same crowds later in that same week.

But Jesus did not die a defeated man. He did not die as a misguided martyr or one who was off-base. And he (most certainly) did not die for no reason. He died for you and for me and for everyone who has ever lived.

Paul says it's of "first importance," what Jesus accomplished in that final week. He says there's nothing more important in life than what Jesus did in those final days.

Peter says it's "the foundation" upon which we build our faith. He says there's no other foundation that can be laid apart from (the one) that was laid (for us) in Christ.

And Jesus said, "This is my work, to do the will of my Father who sent me." This is why I was born (he said), so that I (and not you) would have to die.

And so it was that Jesus rode into Jerusalem on that Palm Sunday so long ago. And so it was that he went to the cross during this Passion Week to pay a price you and I could never pay. And so it is that there's a place in God's kingdom (beginning here and now) for you and for me.

It was the beginning of the end...for Jesus: to his earthly life, to any miraculous signs he would perform that would lead to a false hope for an earthly kingdom, and to the work he came to accomplish for the entire world.

And it was the beginning of the end...for his followers (and for us): to stop living like the world, to any notion of being a disciple without being ready to commit, and to any question about what our own future might hold in him.

My friends, don't let this most Holy Week come and go without fully grasping and (taking hold of) what it means for your life. It was all done for you...in Christ.

Let's pray. Lord God, as we think back on what happened long ago on that first Palm Sunday and as we consider the passion of our Lord as he went to the cross and suffered as he did on our behalf, help us not to think about those events (and go through this week) without remembering that they happened because of and for us.

Lord, guide us through this coming week in such a way that those events (from long ago) might become real and alive in our lives today. Fill us with your Spirit, draw and lead us to Christ, that our commitment to him would lead us also to the foot of his cross, that there (and in him) we would find life. In his name we pray. Amen.