

# Palm Sunday – 2020 sermon

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus. *Philippians 2:5*

I don't doubt that we are anxious, stressed out by worries about our health and livelihoods, the choices and decision we have about in our future – we oscillate between bingeing on bad news and bingeing on mindless distractions – both courtesy of social media! So I make no apologies for claiming your attention today and week as witnesses to the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ. If you want a pathway through darkness and death to life and light, this is it – for Christ went into the heart of darkness, and opened a way for us to follow him to the light on the other side. Amid the maelstrom of events and the turmoil of our hearts, this is where we center ourselves, this is where we find our bearings, our fundamental direction and orientation

## **Two Kingdoms**

Two kingdoms are in conflict in Holy Week –the Kingdom of God, and the Kingdom of this world<sup>1</sup>. One is the kingdom that will not assert itself, will not seize power, or grab control. In the face of false arrest it puts down the sword, in the face of false accusation it is silent, and it submits to injustice, spitting, mockery, scourging, shameful and most cruel death. The other is the kingdom that demands and grabs the world's power – the kingdom which must seek to crush every other power outside itself so as to feel and assert its own. And so this week we observe truth and justice crushed by self-assertive power, seeking to impose its will, and have its own way, in all things

But what kind of kingship will not assert itself? Is it even kingship in any meaningful sense of the word? Is Jesus truly a king? Yet when he made his entrance into Jerusalem, he was content to accept public acclamation as Messiah - the Son of David, the blessed King who comes in the name of the Lord. And for this claim to be the Messiah, the King of Jews, he is indeed convicted. Yet it is always someone else who makes the claims for him – the soldiers mocking him, Hail, King of the Jews! The titulus Pilate ordered to be set over his head, The King of the Jews. And when it is put to him, he answers with a qualified, reluctant affirmative: “Thou sayest” – which means something like “those are your words”, “what you mean by them is not what I mean by them”. He affirms the truth of the title, but with a meaning very different from those passing judgment on him.

What that meaning is, he indicates to the high priest, the only one who might and should have the capacity to understand it, saying, “Hereafter shall ye see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven”. It's an allusion to the prophecy of Daniel 7, who says that the faithful servant of the Lord, who suffers the persecution of the world for the Lord's sake, is exalted in God's good time to his right hand, and comes in the clouds of heaven – not earthly armies – clothed with power from on high. This is power not grabbed but given, not seized but received; it is bestowed in God's own time, and on his own terms, not as booty to the winner in the struggle for mastery and domination. Because power in God's kingdom is given, not grabbed, that's why Jesus waits on God in the humility of a slave who does not belong to himself, but whose life is entirely at the disposal of another. His waiting is not in vain – for when this world's kingdom has done

all that it possibly can do, the power of God is revealed in the resurrection – in the life over which death has no power.

### **Two loves**

The warfare of these two kingdoms or cities is what we witness this week – and it is the conflict of two loves at war in our own souls. The kingdom and city of this world, united by love of self and power over others to the point of contempt for God; the kingdom and city of God, united by love of God to the point of contempt for self and the power grabbed by pride. There is none of us who does not seek and wield power over others – to have our way and establish our will over others – and we will use anything, even our own weakness, to gain this power – as the victimization ideologies of our own time demonstrate. This is the love of self that must die in us in order for the love of God to live and grow in us – in the spirit of humble, patient service, that waits upon God, with the mind of Christ. As St. Paul says: *Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus<sup>ii</sup>* - and how else shall we receive this mind, than by reading the Scriptures set forth by the Prayer Book for this week, in which the mind of Christ is set forth, with all the humility we can muster?

### **Two Covenants**

But know this: we cannot follow Christ's example of humility, as Paul urges us to, in our own power - because even in our best intentions, pride and self-love are not absent. As Jeremiah testifies in the lesson today, Israel's failure to keep the covenant God had given them, its long history of disobedience, of idolatrous pride and self-love, is not some strange aberration - but a definitive exposure of man's helplessness to keep the law of God's kingdom in reliance on his own moral power. On this disobedience must fall the curses mandated by the covenant. Yet Jeremiah also holds out the promise of a new covenant, a new restored communion of the Lord God and his elect people, based on the forgiveness of sins, and the law written by the Spirit in our hearts. It is this promise of a new covenant which at the last supper Jesus announces will be kept, ratified, and inaugurated in his death. For in the bread he blesses, breaks, and gives to his disciples, is a sign of his own *body given for them* in sacrifice on their behalf. And in the cup he blesses and gives to them, a sign of his *blood poured out* in his death, as a sacrifice *for them and for many* to ratify and confirm the new *covenant* foretold by Jeremiah and *for the remission of sins* that it promises. And having prayed that the Father's will be done, Jesus is obedient unto death of the cross, accepting the godforsakenness of those who have forsaken God, the curse mandated by the covenant law that he might bestow on all who believe in him, the blessings of the new covenant – of deliverance from the guilt and power of sin, by the forgiveness of sins and the Spirit's sanctifying gift.

It is by the faith alone that we receive the promised gifts of the new covenant ratified in his blood, even forgiveness and the Spirit who writes God's law in our hearts - it is by faith alone, that we can follow him in the way of the self-humbling love of God. And for those grace to follow him in this way, and for the faith that receives this grace, let us most earnestly be in prayer.

<sup>5</sup> Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: <sup>6</sup> Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: <sup>7</sup> But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: <sup>8</sup> And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. <sup>9</sup> Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: <sup>10</sup> That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; <sup>11</sup> And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

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<sup>i</sup> The opening part of this sermon - on the warfare of the two kingdoms or cities, and the two loves which unite them - follows loosely the argument of a sermon by W. J. Hankey for Palm Sunday in *Common Prayer Volume Six*. This in turn depends on the doctrine of the two cities in Augustine's *City of God*.

<sup>ii</sup> Though *being in the form of God*, - having the same nature as God - *he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped* [ESV] – he did not try to grab, seize, or hold on to that power - <sup>7</sup> *But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a slave, and was made in the likeness of men:* <sup>8</sup> *And being found in form as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.*