

Coda

A Practical Query

Often during Lent a number of pastors have asked what to do on Palm Sunday. Since the gospel reading is quite extensive, there is little time for any sort of a developed sermon. Should the pastor still preach?

In order to break up the tedium of a single voice, some communities actually divide the narrative into distinctive voices, such as the “Crowd,” “the Leading Priests,” “Pilate,” and “Jesus.” Quite often members of the congregation play the role of the crowd calling for Jesus’ death. There have been pastors who intentionally reversed the roleplay and have taken the part of the crowd.

Such a partition of voices does more than break up the tiresome drone of a single reader. Uncomfortable aspects of the narrative begin to gain greater notice. When pastors and community have become sensitive to the problem that the virus of anti-Semitism often has used these scenes to energize Jewish pogroms and to maintain the advance of that prejudice,

conscientious people begin to question whether the offensive passages should be surgically removed.

Before getting out the scissors, it might be better to remind one another of the historical aspects of this narrative material. First, scripture scholarship has for some time now noted that the gospels are only indirect witnesses to the historical Jesus. Each gospel reflects, rather, the time and concerns of that later community. Secondly, when the passion narratives are considered, they have been written out of a particular format—The Tale of the Suffering Innocent One. Such a story format emerged from Jewish scribes' attempt to make sense of the suffering of innocent Jews, persecuted during the rule of Antiochus Epiphanes IV. The question of how the God of Israel could be just if those who kept the traditions suffered so was uppermost in their minds. Their response was the construction of the Tale of the Suffering Innocent One. Here the scribes communicated their conviction that the God of Israel will not forget those who have fallen. They will be vindicated. Out of that narrative tradition the early Jesus writers crafted the passion story of Jesus. This was not created to condemn Jews; rather it was an attempt to do two things simultaneously: to make sense of both the deaths of those community members and that of Jesus. Indeed, by the very nature of the story pattern, Jesus dies as one of the many innocent victims. Jesus' death is a death in solidarity with those whom history would forget. Moreover, this telling of the death of Jesus was not separate from a Jewish context. It was not meant to set Jews against Christians (since Christians did not exist as such), but to make sense of the lost through the application of this story pattern.

The answer to the pastors' initial question rests on how we hear the passion narrative. Go back to the experience and the question that spawn this narrative tradition. Let everyone ask oneself: *Have I ever experienced the suffering of an innocent?* Take some time. For there are very few who have not had that experience, or who will forget the anger that still seethes over it. In fact, the question of the justice of God quickly becomes a major issue. The key for those engaged in the Palm Sunday services is to begin with that fundamental question. Do not put it or the attendant feelings aside. But hear the passion narrative in that fashion. Pastors do not need to say more than this: there

are images and stories into which we can only enter through suffering and this narrative is such. Simply ask the community to recall their experience of innocent suffering. As the words of the narrative wash over them they may well discover a vein of sympathy and solidarity. The story does not remove the pain, but it opens listeners up to find something deeper, where there no longer is isolation but a tragic company of millions of innocents.

A contemporary Russian, Valentin Rasputin, captures much of this in his novel:

Death seems terrible, but it sows the most kind and useful harvest in the souls of the living, and from the seed of mystery and decay develops the seed of life and understanding. Look, think, and have ceremonies and rites! Man is not alone. There are many countrymen in his skin, like men in a boat rowing from shore to shore, and the true person appears perhaps only in the moments of parting and torment—here he is, remember him. (*Farewell to Matyora*)