

Easter Sunday 2024

(OSF)

Preaching on Easter Sunday, which I have now done 50 times, is always a challenge. The event is so momentous—how can my mere words add anything to what God has done in his Son? What different can I say today that will add to this miracle by which we are all saved? Perhaps that is the point— Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever! We don't need anything “different.”

The late Bishop Ken Untener always warned preachers about trying to do too much on Easter. Let the feast speak. As Paul reminds us today, only a little yeast is needed to produce abundantly. So I will be brief.

I would like to take you back seven days to **last** Sunday, Palm Sunday, the day Jesus went up to Jerusalem. On Palm Sunday, two processions entered Jerusalem at Passover. The feast of Passover brought the largest crowds of the year to the city. With so many pilgrims on top of the regular residents, it was almost inevitable that there would be unrest and protests against the Roman occupiers. So at each Passover, the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate that year, rode up to Jerusalem. He would bring extra troops in case of trouble to reinforce the local riot squads.

Picture it: Pilate's procession arrived in Jerusalem from the west, from his residence in Caesarea; Jesus entered the city from the east, from Martha, Mary and Lazarus' home in Bethany. Pilate rode in on a huge warhorse, Jesus on a donkey. He was fulfilling the words of the prophet Zechariah who foretold: “The King of Peace on a donkey will banish the warhorse and battle from the land.” (Zec. 9:9-10) Do you get the picture of what is happening here? The gauntlet has been thrown down and the contrast is perfectly clear: Jesus vs. Pilate, the non-violence of the Kingdom of God vs. the violence of the Roman Empire.

That was the contrast: two arrivals, two entrances, two processions; two ways of life and two choices, represented by these two figures coming into the city on Palm Sunday. Then a few days later, Jesus stands before Pilate—innocent, but gruesomely and wrongly executed.

But on this Sunday, the one we call Easter, spectacularly Jesus is raised from the dead by divine power. And here we are at the heart of the matter. What does the raising of Jesus by God mean? It means that God said a resounding “yes” to Jesus and all he stood for and a firm “no” to the powers that killed him.

Easter means that God is on a collision course with injustice, with violence, with exploitation. God is against the betrayal of Judas, the denial of Peter, and the complicity and corruption of power in Pilate and Herod. He is against Jesus being beaten and tortured. He is against the politically correct judgment of Pilate, who first judged Jesus innocent of any wrong, but then bowed to the pressure of the mob.

And things have not changed. Our God is still against betrayal by a friend or in a marriage. He is still against violence in a family or on the streets of our city. He is still against corruption in government or on Wall Street. God is against the vulgarity and vitriol so glibly portrayed in the media and spouted by our so-called leaders. God is against the moral and physical abuse of spouses and children and the misuse of power in *any* form.

The Easter story is basically a story of where God stands, and that is made eminently clear in the Resurrection. He raised up Jesus who told us to turn the other cheek, to go the extra mile, to give someone your coat when they ask for a shirt. He told us we should go first to be reconciled with our sister or brother, **then** come and offer our gifts at the altar.

He told us not to return evil for evil, but to cry out with him from the cross, “Father, forgive them.” He said feed the hungry, give a drink to the thirsty, and to always remember it profits us nothing to gain the whole world and lose our soul. This Jesus’ way of life is what the Father raises up.

Easter is not about lilies and bunnies and butterflies. It is about life and death, right and wrong. It is a statement—a divine statement of divine values. When those two processions enter the Holy City from different directions, one on a donkey, one on a warhorse, the choice is thrown up to us: Which entrance shall we take? Which procession shall we follow?

Easter is the day God announced His choice. By raising his son from the dead and all that he stood for, God announced His choice. What remains is ours....