

# PALM SUNDAY, TRAGIC TRIUMPH

Sermon preached by The Rev. Dr. Ralph W. Bayfield at  
Good Shepherd Church, Pine Grove, Bluemont, VA, April 9, 2017

There is evidence that as early as the 5<sup>th</sup> Century, the Feast of Palms was celebrated in the Eastern Orthodox churches. But as observed in the Greek and Roman Catholic churches its celebration dates from the 10<sup>th</sup> Century. We learn this from the writing in the work, *Holy Day, Holi Days*.<sup>1</sup> Palm Sunday is a day of irony. It is Jesus' greatest public victory, but it will lead him in just a few days to His defeat on the cross. The events of Palm Sunday are found in chapter 21 of the Gospel according to St. Matthew.<sup>2</sup> This past week a television program, *The Last Days of Jesus*,<sup>3</sup> ended with His crucifixion. The program was historically inaccurate. The last days of Jesus ended, not on the cross, but with the resurrection of Jesus and his meeting with the women and the disciples. The disciples are now called, "Apostles." An apostle is a person who has met and lived with the risen Jesus Christ. It is why St. Paul was so adamant about his being an apostle. The risen Lord Jesus Christ came to Saul as he was walking along the road to Damascus. Jesus says to Saul in a vision, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"<sup>4</sup> Previously, Saul had overseen the stoning and death of the Christian Stephen. Saul, after his encounter with Jesus Christ, now becomes St. Paul, the greatest of the Apostles, and the first person to write about his Christian faith in his First Letter to the Thessalonians.<sup>5</sup> Paul knows Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. He will become the greatest evangelist for

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1 *Holy Days, Holi Days*, Kitchener Sermons, Palm Sunday, April 12, 1987, Toronto, ONT pg. 1

2 The Holy Bible, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Thomas Nelson & Sons, New York, 1952, pg. 775

3 *The Last Days of Jesus*, WETA, Channel 24, April 4, 2017

4 The Holy Bible, *The Acts of the Apostles*, *op.cit.*, pg.865

5 The Holy Bible, *The First Letter to the Thessalonians*, *op cit.* pgs.931-933

the Christian faith.

Following the triumph of Palm Sunday, Jesus will endure persecution, and death on the cross. Peter Taylor Forsyth, the great 20<sup>th</sup> century Scottish Congregationalist preacher put the situation and scene of Palm Sunday like this. In a sermon entitled *The Fatherhood of Death*, Forsyth proclaimed,

“His star rose only to be smothered by the black cloud of death. His joy suddenly sweeps round to sorrow,  
A world before Him, his foot was on the frontier  
And He must turn away to die.  
How like was the Moses of the new Israel to the Moses of the old:  
It was bitter, and life is full of such fates.”<sup>6</sup>

The world works this irony of victory and defeat, triumph and tragedy on all of us sooner or later. All of us live our lives. We are given the gift of faith and we shall all die. Great literature, writing about the lives of people gives us personal illustrations of the triumph and tragedy of life. Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, is at the pinnacle of his power, victorious on the field over all of Rome's enemies. However, he is assassinated by his fellow Roman citizens: “*et tu Brutus!*”<sup>7</sup>

Ernest Hemingway's classic story of *The Old Man and the Sea*, follows the same dramatic course. The old fisherman finally catches the huge fish of his dreams, but he cannot lift the gargantuan fish into his little boat. He ties the fish alongside the boat, but it is torn to pieces and eaten by the sharks. In spite of his heroic efforts to save the great fish he has caught, by the time he gets back to shore, nothing is left of the fish, but a

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6 Sadler, William, Jr., *Master Sermons through the Ages*, Harper and Row, New York, 1963

7 Kitchener Sermons, opp. Cit. pg. 1

huge skeleton of bones.<sup>8</sup>

The world takes our lives and drags them into this triumph, tragedy sequence. Yet in spite of this series of life's events, there is something more in us: something that has found a firm footing in our hopes and faith. The great Austrian psychiatrist, Alfred Adler was pointing to this when he wrote, "You cannot train or condition a living human being for defeat."<sup>9</sup>

Jesus must have known there would be more than the Triumph/Tragedy process in life. How could he have chosen to go to Jerusalem so confidently, which he must have known would be so dangerous for him? The great New Testament scholar, William Barclay comments about Palm Sunday: "Jesus knew full well that he was entering into a hostile city. How enthusiastic the crowd might be. The authorities hated him. They were threatened by his causing unrest among the people. They had sworn to eliminate him, and they had the last word. Most people in such a situation would have considered that discretion was the better part of valor. If a person in his situation had come to Jerusalem, it would have made sense to slip into the city at night. He would have kept to the back streets until he reached his shelter or place of safe keeping. But Jesus entered Jerusalem deliberately in the center of the stage. He deliberately had every eye riveted on himself. His last days, every action is a kind of sublime defiance, a flinging down the gauntlet, a deliberate challenge to the authorities to do their worst."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Kitchener Sermons, Opp.Cit. pg. 1

<sup>9</sup> Adler, Alfred, *International Journal of Individual Psychology*, Vol. 1, No 1, 1935

<sup>10</sup> Barclay, William, *Gospel of St. Matthew*, St. Andrew Press, Edinburgh, UK, 1965 pgs. 266-267

The man considered by many to be the greatest military strategist of all time, the Prussian General, Karl von Clausewitz (1780-1831) wrote: “There is only one decisive victory: the last.”<sup>11</sup>

Jesus intended to have the last victory. He would break the world's victory/defeat and triumph/tragedy sequence by creating a Trinity sequence. It would not be just a Palm Sunday triumph followed by a Good Friday tragedy on the cross. The world's triumph/tragedy sequence is upset by the stupendous ensuing triumph of the resurrection. Palm Sunday would be meaningless and never celebrated had it not been for Easter. Modern, secular television presentations are afraid of the truth, because they cannot make the leap of faith that is required for the reality of the resurrection. Modern secular television presentations of the last days of Jesus are in error if they end with the crucifixion. To end with the crucifixion, makes Palm Sunday a fraud. God's world is not a fraud! Jesus rose from the dead to show us, that with faith in Him, we too shall die, but we too shall rise with Him. Jesus Christ is the Lord of the living. There is meaning and purpose in God's world.

AMEN

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<sup>11</sup> Von Clausewitz, Karl *On War*, Book 6, Chapter 26