

Homily for March 28, 2021 (Passion/Palm Sunday)



One thing we can say about all gospel stories—but especially the gospel stories we hear during Holy Week—is that they are very visual. Even if you never had the privilege of being in Jerusalem, you can easily picture the scene of Jesus riding on a donkey and the crowd waving palm branches. So, picture yourself, once again, amidst all the excitement of the voices shouting “Hosana.”

Since all gospel stories are part of the one story of salvation, allow me to take a temporary detour back to Christmas. Although I love the old, classic Christmas carols, one of my absolute favorite Christmas songs, “Mary, did you know?” only came out in 1991. I think in time it, too, will become a classic. The lyrics invite us to imagine what was going on in the heart and mind of Mary as she held the baby Jesus and pondered what his future would hold. Did she know that Jesus would grow to walk on water, to give sight to the blind, to calm storms, to raise the dead, and to rule nations? We will never know for certain all that went on in the heart and mind of Mary on that first Christmas. All I know is that there was more going on inside of Mary than any of us could image. Similarly, we will never know for certain what was going on in the heart and mind of Jesus as he entered Jerusalem for the last time riding on a donkey. All I know is that there was more going on inside of him than any of us could image.

I wonder if anyone could “hear” what was going on inside of the person riding the colt. What was Jesus feeling? What was he sensing? Did he have a flashback and see the faces of all those he healed? Did he see, once again, the crowd of 5, 000 who were filled with just five loaves and two fish? Did he see the gratitude of the lepers healed and finally made whole? Did his mind go back to the face of the woman once caught in adultery and now no longer trapped by the stares of hypocrites? Or was Jesus looking ahead, into the future, knowing this very crowd’s “Hosanas!” would soon turn into “Crucify him”? Could Jesus be wondering, as he entered Jerusalem, “Do they still not understand where God is to be found?”

Passion Sunday is a better word than Palm Sunday. Passion is the opposite of action. Once Jesus gets on the back of this donkey, he is no longer defined by his actions but only by his passion. Once he got on the donkey, he leaves the world of action behind. From here on in, he is no longer healing, preaching, teaching, or performing miracles. There is no more power coming out of him. He is no longer *doing* things but having things *done* to him. He is beaten, mocked, spat upon, stripped, humiliated, and crucified. The word “passion” literally means to suffer. This is Jesus’ great “letting go.” He is no longer in the driver’s seat but is clearly a

passenger, going where others take him. Instead of leading, he is being led. Perhaps that is the symbol of the donkey.

So, getting back to hearing, let's put "hearing" and "letting go" together. What are we hearing in people who are in the midst of letting something go? Can we hear what is going on in the minds and hearts of seniors who have to let go of their house, to move into an apartment, only to move again, this time, into a nursing home? It is not just a physical move; it is all the memories built into that home. What are we hearing in those in prisons, hospitals, in our own churches and neighbourhoods of the people who are no longer leading but being led? They ride donkeys into their own city of Jerusalem. Do we hear beyond the shouts of Hosana the unspoken voices of those suffering from dementia and those who accompany them? Do we hear, above the clamor of the crowd, what is going on in the heart of the child being bullied or the teenager who goes to school with hundreds of others but who is dying of loneliness?

Isn't that what we all want—just to be heard? Even if others do not agree with us, just the fact that we were acknowledged, that we were heard, makes a world of difference. A parishioner dying in the hospital knows I cannot wave a magic wand and make their terminal cancer go away. All they want is to be acknowledged, to be heard in their pain and with their pain; they don't expect it to be taken away. Every time I hear about a suicide, I automatically wonder if that person was every acknowledged in their pain. In the world of listening, the words not spoken are always more important and revealing than the words that are spoken.

On the cusp of Jesus entering his passion there are two listening stories that have always touched me. The first one is what we traditionally call the Mary and Martha story. As you recall, Jesus visits the home of his friends Mary and Marth, who are sisters. Martha, wanting to be the best of hosts, complains to Jesus that her sister, Mary, is not doing her share of the work. Jesus responds to Martha by saying that Mary, who seems to be sitting on her duff, has chosen the better part. Here comes the context: Jesus is about a week away from dying. The forces of darkness have surrounded him, and he knows his days are numbered. What would you need most if you were about to die an unjust and cruel death? A woman with a spotless house and the best pot roast in town? Or, a person who can sit at your feet and listen to what's heaviest in your heart? I think we all know the answer.

The second listening story also happens to Jesus as he is on the cusp of giving up his life. We heard a bit of it in today's gospel. A woman, who does not say a word, (Why? Because she's a listener) breaks open an entire jar of ointment and pours it over Jesus. She is scolded for being wasteful by the religious leaders. Jesus praises her instead. He knows that she knows that he is on death row. You might say she wants to give him the flowers now rather than adorning his casket with them after he has died. He says, ***"She has anointed my body beforehand for its burial."***

I wonder what was going on in the heart and mind of Mary as she looked into the manger on that first Christmas. I wonder what was going on in the heart and mind of Jesus as he entered into his Passion riding a donkey. I wonder what is going on in the hearts and minds of some many who suffer and are powerless to change the course of their lives. My only hope of knowing, any of this, is to become a better listener myself, especially to the words that never get spoken. It all starts by sitting at the feet of Jesus, the one who always listens to the pain of humanity and always responds with compassion.

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