

From Jubilation to Judgment

Matthew 21:1-11, 26:14-27:66

Palm Sunday, April 17, 2011

Today we have two Gospel readings in one service. It's the only time during the year that happens. When we were gathered outside before we came inside with our palm branches we heard about Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

The reading described how the multitudes gathered around Jesus as he approached the city and welcomed him in a spontaneous outpouring of good-will. They praised him saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord."

One week later the multitudes had changed their tune. Instead of blessing Jesus they clamored for the Roman governor to crucify him. In just a few minutes we will hear a dramatic and extended presentation of that Passion Gospel, which will replace the sermon.

And so how do we understand this? In the first reading the crowds were happy and jubilant. In the second we will see they were angry and vicious. To some extent the crowds might not have been comprised of the same people, although they all were Jews in Jerusalem for the Passover

But it is clear that the wrath visited on Jesus in the second reading stands in sharp contrast to the adulation of the first. Something happened. Somehow perceptions changed.

One explanation is that the crowds of ordinary and regular Jews welcomed Jesus with their palm branches because they thought he could be a conquering hero who would liberate them from Roman oppression.

Jewish leaders, however, feared that Jesus' ability to generate crowds and unrest would threaten the Roman overlords and cause them to restrict or even abolish Jewish worship. And so those Jewish leaders, not the Jewish people, conspired to kill Jesus by agitating selected people to call for his death.

The story of the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ you will now hear sets the stage for the remainder of Holy Week. The reading does not have a happy ending. And if our service stopped at that point we would be caught up prematurely in the darkness of Good Friday.

But today we also celebrate the Eucharist, which will grant us a reprieve for the moment. And during that interval we will celebrate our Holy Week services and prepare for those solemn, and then ultimately joyous, three days that begin after we strip the altar on Thursday.

And so, I ask that you now give your attention to our presentation of this incomparable event on which our salvation is based. You may follow along in your bulletins. Those who have parts are listed on the back page.