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Palm Sunday – Year B

1 April 2012

Christ Church, Little Rock

“Waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God.” It is a small phrase. It is taken from today’s gospel. But it may be the phrase that lives on long after our loud and rather brassy “hosannas” of this day have echoed into silence.

Waiting is what we all spend so much of our lives doing, sometimes with expectation, sometimes with expectation that something holy will come out of the messes in which we find ourselves. Waiting in line at the grocery store. Waiting for the economy to turn around. Waiting for a return to health or a better relationship. Waiting for the child to return home. Sometimes simply waiting to die.

There are always those among us who wait. Period. The gospel story of the Passion of Christ is filled with waiting, primarily people waiting for death. Pilate is waiting for Jesus to die. The story tells us that he starts making inquiries as to whether or not this convicted criminal is dead. Something must be done with anyone who would challenge the power structures of the day.

The religious officials are waiting for Jesus to die, no doubt. Those of us in the official religious world are never quite comfortable when someone comes along and questions how we have always done things. Today’s gospel should be sobering for members of the clergy.

And I bet Peter is waiting for Jesus to die. Each of us knows only too well how painful it is to face someone whom we have let down, as exemplified when Peter denies his friendship with Jesus. We simply want the injured party to go away so we will not feel shame any longer.

Waiting. Period.

And then there are those people who wait expectantly. In the Passion narrative I put my money on the women who, Mark tells us, stand looking on from a distance at the horror of the crucifixion. These women used to follow Jesus and provide for him when he was in Galilee. As with these women in first century Palestine, those who wait expectantly are often the people who are on the margins of society. It is why such people look on from a distance. People on the inside don’t have to wait for anything. Whatever they want is already there. But for those people on the margin, on the periphery, there arises a sometimes-inchoate hope that things will get better: The unemployed, the working poor, the ostracized, the ignored, the invisible. In order to get through life, you can do little but hope expectantly while you wait.

And then there are those who wait expectantly for the kingdom of God. I don’t have to guess who fills this role in the Passion story. To quote Mark’s gospel, we are told in those very words that it is Joseph of Arimathea who is waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God.

There is waiting. There is waiting expectantly. And there is waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. On this Sunday of the Passion, we hear what happens when someone does the last of these three things. He asks for the body of Jesus.

It is really quite the audacious request. In fact, Mark's gospel says that Joseph boldly goes to Pilate to do so, or as one translation of the text puts it, he daringly goes to Pilate. If Joseph of Arimathea is our stand-in, then we are being told that our response to all the evil of this world, all its death and cruelty, is to dare to claim the body of Jesus for our own. It is what the church has been called to do for going on two thousand years. We dare claim the body of Jesus because we know that in that body we will find the kingdom of God, the evil and horror of the world turned upside down. We claim the resurrection of Christ even on Palm Sunday and Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. We wait expectantly for it.

We Christians walk the way of the cross this week. We go headlong toward death, we know what will happen Good Friday. We claim death. In fact, we do so every time we celebrate the Eucharist. "Christ has died," we say, and still we ask for the body at our holy table. We claim that human beings must die to a lot of things in this world: die to pride, die to fear of the other or fear of self, die to blindness of the hurts of the people around us, die to smug self-satisfaction. When we see all that evil, some external to us yet with which we are complicit, and some coming from deep inside our own broken selves, we know that something has to die.

So we die to it, and in an act of audaciousness, perhaps even of foolishness in the eyes of the world, we claim the body of Jesus because we know that even in death there is hope. In some way as not yet fully understood by us, death and death's manifestations of pride and hurt and war and hunger and hatred will not have the final word. The world was created for something better.

That is our hope. That is our message to an unbelieving world. It is so much our hope that Joseph and all of us go back to the earth in the form of a tomb and wait to see what will be born next, what will be re-created, wait expectantly for the kingdom of God, even though we may not have any firm idea what it will look like. It is a daring thing to do, to say that all those evils will not have the final word. But, you know something? Joseph of Arimathea was proved correct. Something did come forth from death. Old Pilate would not have the last word. The body of Jesus was worth claiming. And I am convinced that just as powerfully it will be worth claiming by us as well. Here is why. We are not going to let evil have the last word. Amen.