

"NO OTHER WAY"
March 19, 1989

TEXT: Luke 19:31 "If anyone asks you why you are untying it, you shall say this, 'The Lord has need of it.'

I wonder what you see in this old, familiar story. You have heard these words year after year. But have you ever wondered why? Are they just words --to be casually heard and just as casually forgotten? Are they, perhaps, just a traditional way to prepare for the real celebration to follow. Or do they have a meaning all their own. Is there something in this passage that we really ought to hear and remember? I think there is. And this morning I would like to share a part of that with you.

For me, Palm Sunday is more than just the beginning of Holy Week. I believe that it is important in its own right. Important because it shows us what a world of difference there is between applauding Christ and following Him. And I am convinced that only as we learn that lesson can we --or our world-- know "the things that make for peace." There is no other way.

On the surface, of course, that first Palm Sunday seemed to be a great and wonderful triumph. If there had been newspapers in those days, the correspondent for the Jerusalem Herald would almost certainly have described the event in glowing terms. Perhaps his story might have gone something like this.

"Yesterday, a new prophet, Jesus of Nazareth, came to Jerusalem for the Passover. And thousands of screaming fans and admirers turned out to welcome him.

"As if to claim for himself, Zechariah's ancient prophecy concerning the Messiah, the prophet came into the city riding upon a donkey. In their excitement, his followers strewed their clothes before him, and bystanders cut leafy branches and spread them along the way. Deafening shouts of "Hosannah" and "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord" filled the air. And a feeling of anticipation spread throughout the city.

"Surely no Roman Emperor, no conquering general ever had a more glorious welcome. For a while it seemed as if the whole world was paying homage and screaming its approval."

Even today, as we look at the gospel record, that is the picture we see. The whole city, with its thousands of holiday visitors, accepting Christ as their Messiah. Who could possibly have foreseen that, just a few days later, many of those same people would turn against Him and insist upon His death? But that is exactly what they did. And, if our hypothetical correspondent had written such a story, he would have soon regretted it. On Friday he would have had a very different one.

No, Palm Sunday was not a "triumph." But that is not the point. It was a crucial moment just the same. For it was Jesus' way of forcing the world to take sides, something which, till then, he had carefully avoided. For three years or so, He had worked in quiet, unobtrusive ways, staying out of the "limelight" of Jerusalem, preaching and teaching in Galilee and other out-of-the-way places. All that time He had carefully avoided publicity, again and again telling those He had healed to say nothing about it. Mark's Gospel especially shows Him doing everything He could to hide His identity.

The reason for all that secrecy was simple. He was buying time. Time to train His disciples. Oh, they were still weak, all right. Still confused about a great many things. But they would be able to carry on when He was gone. He had seen to that. And now it was time to change His tactics. Time to tell the whole world who He was. Time to force a choice. Like Joshua at Shechem, it was time for Jesus to say, not only to the Jews, but to the world, "Choose ye this day whom ye shall serve." Like Elijah on Mount Carmel, it was time for Him to ask, "How long will you go limping with two different opinions?"

And He could not do that in Galilee. Or in Samaria or any of those other places. To do that He had to go to Jerusalem. There was no other way. So go to Jerusalem he did. And, when He got there He showed the whole world who He was. He borrowed a donkey and rode it into the city, as Zechariah had promised centuries earlier. There could be no mistaking His meaning. No healthy man would ever ride a donkey for any other reason.

And, oh, how the people approved! The news of what He was doing spread like wild fire. And thousands upon thousands lined the way to cheer him on. At long last, they thought, after centuries of waiting, here was their deliverer. They gathered leafy branches from the fields and spread them before Him to make a path of honor. They cut palm branches from the trees and waived them in celebration. And they shouted. How they shouted. "Hosannah." "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord." "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest." No one could have asked for more approval than that.

But that was Sunday. Just five days later everything had changed. Once again there were shouts, but this time they were different. This time they shouted, "Crucify Him. Crucify Him." And when Pilate asked, "Why? What evil has he done?" they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!" And they took him to a

place called Golgotha. And they crucified Him between two thieves."

Jesus had forced them to choose. And they chose Barabbas. He forced them to choose. And they chose the world —though it cost them the Kingdom of God. Some, like the Sadducees, were afraid of trouble. Afraid of what the Romans might do. Others, like the Pharisees, were afraid of change. Afraid of what Jesus might do to the precious traditions. Still others, like the Romans and the temple priests, were just protecting their power. Power and the luxuries that power affords. And some, unnamed and un-numbered, were just too busy to care. Jesus had forced them to choose. And they chose Barabbas.

Most of them probably did not want to choose at all. They wanted to "have their cake and eat it too" as we might say. They wanted to applaud Him without the inconvenience of following Him. They wanted to cheer Him and go right on doing what they had always done. But they could not. They had to choose because He made them choose.

That was nearly two thousand years ago. But what does Palm Sunday mean for us today? It means the very same thing. Just as it always has. Christ did not just come to Jerusalem centuries ago. He comes to all His people everywhere. And He comes every day. And when He does, He still forces us to choose. For He does not want our applause. He wants our commitment.

How could we expect anything else? After all, applause is easy. We applaud every time we join His church. We applaud every time we have our children baptised. We applaud whenever we ask to be married in a church, with a minister, "before God and this company." But there is a world of difference between applause and commitment. And, like those thousands who lined the road to Jerusalem, we, too, are forced to choose. You do not have to be a great scholar to understand that. To love God more than we love ourselves, more than we love the world with all its pleasures, may be difficult, but it is not complicated.

And Palm Sunday reminds us of that. It tells us that now is the time. Time to decide what place He will have in our lives. There are many who accept Him as a great teacher, a fine human being. Many who applaud His fine, unselfish life. Many who do not even claim to be Christian agree that He was a great man.

But now, as on the first Palm Sunday, He asks much more than that. He claims to be Sovereign of our lives. He claims to be our Lord. He challenges our petty religious traditions and regulations and insists that we live what we claim to believe. He demands that we accept His words as binding in our lives. Not just on Sunday morning, but all day, every day, even when it is not easy. Especially when it is not easy. And He asks us to make up our minds now. To throw in our lot with Him once and for all. That is what Palm Sunday means. If we want to know the things that make for peace, there is no other way.