

ST. THOMAS EPISCOPAL CHURCH
KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE
The Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday, Year A
April 17, 2011

TO BE FORGIVEN FOR OUR BETRAYAL (Matthew 27:1-54)
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Today we enter into the most solemn, most important, and (potentially) most life-changing week of the Church year. I look forward to Holy Week every year. Surely, it is a busy time. But, there is something about the Church's yearly reiteration of the last week of Christ's life that, for me at least, dwarfs every other event that we share together. The reading of the lengthy Passion Gospel is an outward and audible sign of that significance.

It is good for us to remember what we are about this particular morning. The Church calls this *both* Palm Sunday *and* the Sunday of the Passion. I used to find that a sort of "split-personality" fact. By that I mean, on the one hand the story of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. The crowds waving branches of palms and crying "Hosanna in the highest!"

But on the other hand, we are immediately plunged into the story of Jesus' betrayal, trial, torture, excruciatingly painful execution, and death. The picture cannot get any darker than the depiction of suffering and abandonment that we get in the passion story.

I said that I used to think that way. But one of the advantages that I have had over the years in teaching an adult Bible study class every week night is that there is always something new to learn. During one such occasion one of the participants pointed out that his study Bible said that the word "hosanna" is not an exclamation of praise—it means something entirely different. We looked up the word in the latest Bible dictionary and learned that it literally means "God help us."

That, of course, puts a very different spin on things. No longer do we have a split-personality Sunday. Rather, the two parts of our liturgy are of a whole. In the Liturgy of the Palms we cry out with the ancient peoples of Jerusalem, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. *Hosanna in the highest.*" "Hosanna," *God help us!*

And in the Liturgy of the Word and Holy Communion we hear God's answer to our prayer. That answer is Christ's death for us. Jesus chose to suffer because of his love for us. He knew there was no other way, that any escape from his accepted fate would undo what he was doing. And so he accepted his pain.

Jesus' most trusted friends deserted him in his trial. He faced it alone, yet never showing bitterness, never condemning them. Are we able to identify with those who literally betrayed Jesus? We are inclined to do the same, to be like those friends. Our betrayals are not performed before the cross, but in the everyday world in which we live. Every sharp word, every ignored plea for help, every bit of gossip, every hug shrugged off, every lustful look at another who is not our spouse, every cutting of corners in the workplace or in school, every sin we commit in thought, word, or deed—things done and left undone—put us right there with those who betrayed Our Lord.

How grateful we should be that Jesus would forgive—Peter and the others who turned their backs in fear. But not just those closest to Jesus—us as well. Liturgically, we are not yet before the cross. That comes the end of this coming week. But all of us know the next part of the story by heart. What more wonderfully graceful gift than this that we

have been given, to be forgiven for our betrayal, and to be received as though we were always faithful?