

2023 04 02 – Surely Not I, Jesus?

Scripture: Matthew 21:1-11, 26:17-30 (The Inclusive Bible)

On Palm Sunday we remember and celebrate Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem nearly 2000 years ago. We remember that he rode on the back of a humble donkey. We remember that there were great crowds of people who lay cloaks and tree branches along the path where Jesus was riding. We remember how they shouted Hosanna's and called Jesus the "Heir to the House of David!" We remember and we celebrate with our own palms and parades, with our own hosannas!

As we celebrate, it's easy to forget that just a few days later Jesus was arrested, beaten, nailed to a wooden cross and left to die. It is easy to forget, and that's why, on Palm Sunday, I sometimes like to read a little further in the text. Today you have already heard two readings from the Gospel of Matthew and before we leave you will hear one more. The first reading was, of course, Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday. The second reading took place on Thursday, on the day of Passover, the day when Jewish people celebrate their ancestors' exodus from slavery in Egypt.

An important part in the Passover celebration is the Passover meal. Jesus and his disciples ate this meal on the first day of the festival. According to archeologists, the meal was very likely made up of a bean stew, lamb, olives, bitter herbs, a fish sauce, unleavened bread, dates and wine. And rather than sitting at a table, they were likely reclining on floor cushions as they ate. This is

also the meal that we remember each time we celebrate communion as we will later in today's service. <https://www.livescience.com/54154-jesus-last-supper-menu-revealed-in-archaeology-study.html>

But rather than the meal that was eaten, I would like to concentrate on the conversation that took place during the meal. The scripture tells us that "while they were eating [Jesus] said, 'The truth is, one of you is about to betray me.'" Now, as the reader, we know who that person is because, in a previous section of this chapter, the author has already informed us that Judas Iscariot agreed to hand Jesus over to the chief priests for thirty pieces of silver.

But the other disciples had no idea what was going on. They were very upset by the news and started asking Jesus, "Surely, it is not I, Teacher?" "Surely, not I? Even Judas, the guilty one, had the nerve to ask that same question. To which Jesus replied, "You have said it yourself."

How many of us have been put in similar circumstances? How many of us have had to ask ourselves, "Is it possible that I could betray this person that I care for?" Surely, not I? Is it possible that out of fear, or greed or lust or sloth or one of the other deadly sins that I would betray the trust of a spouse, partner, family member or friend? Surely, not I? How many of us have wondered? How many of us have been the one betrayed? How many of us have been the betrayer? I'm guessing, since we are all human, that many of us have been in at least one or maybe even all of these positions.

As this Passover conversation is happening, the disciples are lounging on cushions, enjoying a good meal. They are finding it difficult to imagine that they would ever betray their teacher, their rabbi. Little did they know what was about to happen. Little did they know how frightened they were going to be as Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. As you will hear during our final scripture reading, eventually they all fled for their lives and deserted their teacher. Surely, not I, rabbi?

It's easy to be faithful when things are going well. When Jesus asked the disciples to go and fetch the donkey for the parade, there was no need to ask, "Surely, not I, teacher?" When Jesus asked the disciples to prepare the Passover meal, they didn't question his request. In fact, knowing that the journey could be dangerous, the disciples had followed Jesus from the relative safety of Galilee to Judah and eventually to the city of Jerusalem. Even as their uncertainty grew, they didn't question their loyalty.

How far are we willing to follow Jesus? At what point are we going to ask, "Surely, not I, teacher? Surely, not I?" Will it be when other priorities in our lives become more important? Will it be when the monetary cost is just too high? Will it be when what we are being asked to do is just too radical? Will it be when the journey takes us to a place that is uncomfortable? Will it be when we are being asked to give up the familiar for something that is unknown? How far are we willing to follow? When will we feel the need to say, "Surely, not I, Jesus? Surely not I! You can't be asking that of me!"

It's true, as followers of Jesus we are called to stretch ourselves. We are called to be more courageous, more generous, more caring, more compassionate, more daring. We are often called to go beyond our comfort zone:

- To call or visit people we don't know;
- To speak or read in public;
- To chair a committee or lead a study group;
- To share our personal stories;
- To learn new skills (like making coffee or baking a pie);
- To let go of old traditions and create some new ones.

Our church has just entered into a new governance model and the reality is that we are figuring it out as we go. Not everything will go smoothly, but already we have seen glimpses of growth and new opportunities.

We will fail. We will make mistakes. We will look foolish on occasion. Like Judas and the other disciples, we will let our baser impulses get in the way and, at times, we may even run away. But failure is a part of every journey. Failure means that we are trying to grow, that we are attempting to move forward as individuals and as a faith community.

The good news is that failure is the best way to learn and it will lead to success. We know, from the book of Acts and Paul's letter that even the disciples eventually figured out what it was they were called to do. So next time, instead of "Surely, not I?" try saying, "Yes, pick me," knowing that it's OK to fail because there will an opportunity to try again.

The good news is that our God is a God of love, a God of compassion, a God of grace. When we fail, we are not alone. God is with us and we are surrounded by a community of faith that will support us and help us to grow in love. May it be so. Amen.