

Passion (Palm Sunday)

Little Timmy was sick on Palm Sunday and stayed home from church with his mother. His father returned from church holding a palm branch. The little boy was curious and asked why. His father explained, "You see, when Jesus came into town, everyone waved palm branches to honor him; so we got palm branches today." "Aw, shucks," grumbled Little Timmy. "The one Sunday I can't go to church, and Jesus shows up!"

All of us are not doubt familiar with the old African-American spiritual, "Were you there when they crucified the Lord?" I don't know who or even when the song was written, but I'm sure it was many centuries after the crucifixion of Christ.

In a historical sense then it's absurd to even ask the question, "Were you there when they crucified the Lord?" No one who has actually heard that song was present on the day we now call "Good Friday." All of the people who committed and witnessed that crime have long since passed away.

Yet for some reason, we don't consider it absurd to ask if you were there when they crucified the Lord. You see, it speaks to our hearts. We feel compelled to take it seriously. Why is that? Why should it matter to us one way or the other?

There have been other great tragedies in history....On March 15, 44 B.C. Julius Caesar was assassinated. It was a gross miscarriage of justice. But we don't feel ourselves involved in that incident in any particular way. We read about it in history, and then forgot about it.

The death of Jesus, on the other hand, haunts us. We can't forget about it. Why do you think that is?

Well, I think it's because we know that it was more than just an event in time. It was the focus of the age-long struggle between good and evil. And all of us are involved in that, on one side or the other.

We have shared the spirit of those who nailed Jesus to the cross. In that sense, we were there. Every sin that was present on Calvary is present in this church today.

Fear was there.....fear of new ideas, fear of change, fear of radical goodness that can't be intimidated. You see, genuinely good people are scary. They trouble us. They remind us of what we ought to be and are not. On the one hand, we want to be like them. On the other hand we want to get rid of them.

It was fear that fanned the flames of hatred on Calvary. People always hate what they fear. It's hard to imagine how anyone could have hated Jesus. But think about it. Can we be absolutely certain that we would not have hated him, had we actually been there?

If we had been the priests, who felt their power threatened by his teaching, would we have hated him? If we had been the patriots, whose only mission was to expel Rome, how would we have felt about his ideas of loving our enemies? If we had been the Pharisees, who bore the brunt of his criticism, would we have hated him?

Jesus was seen as a real threat by many people. And because they feared him, they hated him.

Cruelty was also there. It was made visible in a crown of thorns thrust upon his head. It beat him with whips. It spit on him and drove nails through his body and left him to die.

Now we don't think of ourselves as cruel people, but cruel people never do. They explain their behavior in other terms. The soldiers weren't being cruel, they were just doing their job. Pilate wasn't cruel, he was just preserving the peace. The priests weren't being cruel, they were just defending the truth.

When we are determined to have our own way at any cost, cruelty becomes easy. It breaks up homes in pursuit of its own happiness. It preys on the weak and the helpless in the name of necessity. It justifies selfishness in the name of religion.

Why should we try to eliminate poverty? Jesus himself said, "The poor will be with you always." No, cruelty did not end with the first century. It's still very much alive today. We just don't see it as cruelty when our own interests are involved.

Stupidity was also there the day they crucified my Lord. You see, when people reject the best and choose the worst, it's always stupid.

Yes, fear, cruelty and stupidity were there the day they crucified Jesus on Calvary. They all played a part in his death. BUT the story has another dimension.

Faith was also there. The only thing that saw Jesus through that awful ordeal was his trust in God. He was confident that nothing, not even a cross, could stop his cause. He put everything into the hands of his Father and trusted him for the result. Yes, faith was present when they crucified my Lord.

Hope was also there. Just when Jesus seemed to be finished, a dying thief said to him, "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And that nameless man has become one of Calvary's heroes. Everyone else had given up, but in the heart of a dying thief, there was a spark of hope. And from that day to this, it has illuminated the darkness of many a hopeless situation.

Love was also there that day. Hatred was the dominant theme. Hatred made all the noise, but Jesus kept on loving regardless of what they did to him. He never longed for revenge. He loved them to the very end.

It was a strange mix that day at Calvary. On the one side were fear, cruelty and stupidity. On the other side were faith, hope and love.

Were you there when they crucified the Lord? Yes, we were all there. And we are still there today. The only question is, on which side will we take our stand? AMEN!