

TAKE A STAND - PROTEST OR PALMS?



Martin Luther King Jr. once lamented, "Crowd pressures have unconsciously conditioned our minds and feet to move to the rhythmic drumbeat of the status quo. Many voices and forces urge us to choose the path of least resistance and bid us never to fight for an unpopular cause and never to be found in a minority of two or three." I don't believe that even he could have conceived the state of our Nation currently where protests, rallies and marches would become so common. The fact that the violent protest and correlating scourge of our Nation's capital occurred on January 6, Epiphany, cannot be overlooked. Epiphany literally means

"manifestation or striking appearance." Our great Nation has **manifested** its constitutional right for peaceful protest but also, and quite unfortunately, the **sinful manifestation** of violence, hatred, destruction of property and a disrespect for life and the rights of others that we previously considered inviolable.

It has been said that there are some definitive reasons to take a stand and protest: **Take a stand** to increase the visibility of the cause you support. **Take a stand** to proclaim that we are not alone but rather joined together in unity. **Take a stand** to start a discussion or even a debate. **Take a stand** to be an essential voice for the minority, the vulnerable and those being oppressed. **Take a stand** because sometimes your stand will result in a win or change things in ways beyond what you ever thought or considered. But take a stand.

However, as we prepare to enter into Holy Week this Palm Sunday, we have the opportunity to **join** the first century protesters **taking a stand** that first occurred as Jesus entered Jerusalem the week of His death on the cross. **Do you realize what YOU are protesting and voicing as you shout your "hosannas (Lord, save us now!)" and wave your palm branches?**

Beth Quick from her writing, *"Mob Mentality"* rightly lamented, "For once, it seems everyone [on Palm Sunday] is united in their actions towards Jesus. All of them, all of them, are united in their abandonment and rejection of Jesus. It is not just the Jews who act against Him, but also the Romans. Not just the religious leaders, but also the common 'regular' people. Not just Judas, who we can readily write off as corrupted and evil, but also Peter, the faithful disciple, and the others, who never even get mentioned during all of Jesus' trial, beatings, and crucifixion. Not one who Jesus healed, not one who Jesus forgave, not one who Jesus broke bread with speaks for Him, acts on His behalf."

Those innocent-looking Palm Sunday crowds—with palms waving and people shouting—offer a glimpse of a *revolution*. Reflecting on Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem, one senses the irony of it all. The Romans have added security forces to maintain order during the Passover Festival. **(Doesn't that sound familiar?)** Isn't it just like the powerful to keep the powerless in their place ... safe from disturbing an uneasy peace? **(We've seen that recently too!)** Until that day, until that moment, the followers of Jesus had been just that: followers - largely passive, reflective. They have traipsed after Jesus all over Palestine listening, learning, witnessing. When Jesus argued with the civil and religious officials, they watched, tense and riveted. When He defended a prostitute, they gasped. When He conversed in public with a woman from Samaria, they winced. When He defied the Sabbath laws, they cringed. When He ate with tax collectors and declared that the last shall be first, and the first last, the rich poor, they glanced around guardedly to see who was listening and watching. When He kissed lepers and healed those of broken bodies, they whispered in fascinated awe. But now He has raised the dead - and Lazarus, who spent four days in the tomb, is now walking among the Passover crowd of over two million people from all over the Mediterranean basin. **There's no hiding now! They had to take a public stand.** If you're a follower of Jesus, you're under suspicion of both the Romans and the Jewish authority.

Palm Sunday is the day the followers of Jesus made a revolutionary change. In this peaceful march of palms and praises, of hosannas and psalms, the followers of Jesus make public that their hearts, their allegiance belong, not to Caesar, not to that pretender god, but to Jesus, the Prince of Peace. For the past three years, from the day Jesus called them from their fishing nets and tax booths, the commitment to follow Jesus had been personal, intimate, and private. But on Palm Sunday, the commitment to follow Jesus becomes public and absolute.

When we wave our palms and shout hosanna to the Son of David, we are participating in a *subversive act* - taking a public stand. The waving of palm branches makes a statement of loyalty, of absolute submission, of praise and worship worthy of one's Lord and King. On this upcoming Palm Sunday, as on the first, we are boldly claiming that JESUS and **only JESUS** is LORD and KING ... and that power, status, money, military force or government are NOT! The parade of palms that we remember and will re-enact is not a flowery yearly ritual but a *revolutionary statement* declaring the Lordship of Jesus of every aspect of our lives. Our Lord and King comes to us and He is salvation Himself. We hold high the palms and we are saying that Jesus is Lord of MY life, my eternal life! And when we do this as the Church, individually and collectively we become part of a movement where we boldly profess that Jesus IS the one and only Way, the one and only Truth and the one and only Life. YOU are taking a stand and making a public witness - not just for one day or week but for one holy week after another until Jesus comes again in glory.

Of course, there are other choices. The sinful heart will wave a palm branch for anyone; the saved heart will wave a palm branch for only One. The sinful heart will wave a palm branch in response to being made to feel comfortable - especially if it means not having to change. Our sinful hearts would gladly welcome a lord and king who would end this COVID mess and bring healing to all; one who could pull us out of dire financial straits, reduce our mortgage, pay for our health care, and protect us from terrorists or violence in the streets. Our sinful hearts desire a lord and king who will not judge but will look the other way when we sin and allow us to do as we please for the sinful self wants to be in control and knows what it wants - at least for the moment. But that kind of lord and king cannot and will not save. That lord and king has no answer to "hosanna" except to say - "What you see and have on your own is what you get." Nothing more and nothing less. It's sinful pride that waves that palm branch - and sinful pride has nothing to celebrate.

There is a cost to following this Jesus. **It costs us our sin.** It costs us our former way of life that leads only to death. His Lordship isn't forced upon us - and it may even appear to be weak because His Lordship allows us to live our lives in free will. But by waving our palm branches, **it's truly revolutionary, life-changing** - because your life cannot stay the same - your lifestyle, your calendar, your priorities, your habits, your marriage, your choice of friends, your use of the internet, your families, your use of time, talents, and treasures - when this Jesus is your Lord and King. And by the grace of God, it does not. He sees you at your worst, and still went to the cross for you, completing His redemption for you to be His own. He did it all - He does it all still - out of love for you. Therefore, no burden - be that COVID, cancer, surgery, hatred, racism, finances, relationships, whatever it may be - is too heavy, no task too lowly, no assignment too difficult to be undertaken by Your Lord and King who loves you the way He loved you at the cross. **It's settled there - once and for all.**

That's why you wave your palm branches. This is a bold statement of faith in our Lord and King who answers our "hosannas" as no one else can or does. He is present with us always even when the world abandons us. He forgives without limit, loves without condition, and saves us by grace now and for eternity. We are people of the resurrection who will spend each day in faith either literally waving our palm branches or boldly voicing the revolutionary truth where we live and breathe in word and deed: There is only one Lord and King for me: Jesus!

In my ministry, Palm Sunday has also been Confirmation Sunday. We ask the Catechumens to publicly, boldly, take a stand, confessing that their lives of faith are so important to them that they would rather die than fall away from it. Palm Sunday fills us with the wisdom to live our lives one holy week after another. Every week is holy when it celebrates the triumphal entry of

Jesus into our hearts. Every week is holy when it is lived under the reign of Jesus our King and His cross. From the palms to passion, from joy to sorrow, every week of our lives is wrapped in the love of Jesus Christ our King who was obedient to the point of death on a cross for you and for all the world which Jesus loves.

Will you take a stand in your life, with your life, with your voice and with your feet? Being a witness is a bold endeavor - yes, even a revolutionary one considering the world in which we live. But lives not yet saved by the grace of Jesus Christ are depending on this waving of palm branches and the willingness to boldly proclaim Him. What can each of us do in our English District congregations? I am in no position to say - do this or do that. But on behalf of the Evangelization Team, I encourage you to revisit those definitive reasons to join the protest and take a stand. They are true of our lives as children of God and witnesses for the saving life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But your stance may not be going door to door or marching in your neighborhood. It may not be a sign declaring Christ as Lord. It may be simply sharing, "Jesus loves you." I close this article with this riveting illustration:

Bill Wilson pastors an inner city church in New York City. His mission field is a very violent place. He himself has been stabbed twice as he ministered to the people of the community surrounding the church. Once a Puerto Rican woman became involved in the church and was led to Christ. After her conversion she came to Pastor Wilson and said, "I want to do something to help with the church's ministry. I want to take a stand for the faith that has changed my life!" He asked her what her talents were and she could think of nothing -- she couldn't even speak English -- but she did love children. So he put her on one of the church's buses that went into neighborhoods and transported kids to Sunday school. Every week she performed her duties. She would seek out the child on the bus who appeared the most troubled, put him on her lap and whisper over and over the only words she had learned in English: "**I love you. Jesus loves you.**" After several months, she became attached to one little boy in particular. The boy didn't speak. He came to Sunday school every week with his sister and sat on the woman's lap, but he never made a sound. Each week she would tell him all the way to Sunday school and all the way home, "I love you and Jesus loves you." One day, to her amazement, the little boy turned around and stammered, "I---I---I love Jesus and I love you, too!" Then he put his arms around her and gave her a big hug. That was 2:30 on Palm Sunday afternoon. At 6:30 that night he was found dead. His own mother had beaten him to death and thrown his body in the trash. "I love you and Jesus loves you." Those were some of the last words this little boy heard in his short life -- from the lips of a Puerto Rican woman who could barely speak English. This woman took a stand and voiced the truth she believed with all her heart. Through that bold witness a little boy who never heard the word "love" in his own home responded to Jesus' love for him.

Because of the witness of Holy Week, the waving of palm branches and the voicing of “hosannas,” we have the wisdom of the cross that allows us to recognize Jesus as our Savior and King and the One who allows us to live our lives in a chorus of hosannas because He endured holy week so that we might live our lives one holy week after another. So take a stand with your palms and watch the Holy Spirit change lives for eternity.

The Evangelization Team would love to hear your story as a fellow witness for Christ. Share your stories at EvangelizationTeam@englishdistrict.org. We are also looking for those who find joy in bearing witness for Christ. We could use your help serving on the Evangelization Team where your thoughts and ideas will bless our District. Please prayerfully consider it. Rejoice in knowing that your Savior has already answered your prayer for the one thing you need the most: GRACE. How sweet it is to share this truth of answered prayer.

Have a blessed Holy Week!

In Christ Alone,
Pastor John Diener
Galatians 2:20