

“HE STIRS UP THE PEOPLE BY TEACHING”

A Sermon for Sunday of the Passion, March 20, 2016

Text: Luke 23:1-49

But they were insistent and said, “He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place.”

Do you know what makes the story of Jesus so interesting?

Jesus himself is fairly straightforward. He calls all people, and I mean *all people*, to come into and live in the kingdom of God, rejoicing in the love of God and responding to it with love of others.

Same old, same old. All the time.

In 2 Corinthians 1:19, Paul says: “For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not ‘Yes and No,’ but in him it is always ‘Yes.’ For in him every one of God’s promises is a ‘Yes.’”

This is not actually very interesting. It is consistent, uniform, and solid. “For the Son of Man did not come into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.” Period.

No, It isn’t Jesus that makes the story interesting. It’s the response to Jesus. For in fact the response to Jesus *was* “Yes and No.”

Yes, we’ll let you heal us, but don’t tell us we need to repent. Yes, we’ll eat the bread you provide, but no, we will not eat with sinners. Yes, we will follow you, but no, not to Jerusalem. And the crowds did not just vacillate, they split. Between the bored and the excited, the good people and the bad people. Jesus always got a rise out of people, but it wasn’t always a standing ovation.

So we have come to Palm Sunday and Sunday of the Passion. A day which represents the divided and confused response to Jesus. The hymn “My Song is Love Unknown” puts it this way:

Sometimes we strew his way and his sweet praises sing; resounding all the day
hosannas to our king. Then “Crucify” is all our breath, and for his death we thirst and
cry.”

The divided response to Jesus is represented by the two names for this Sunday: “Palm Sunday” because we wave palms to hail our Lord; “Passion Sunday” because of the “passion” or “suffering” which will visit upon him in our anger.

Jesus himself does not change. He will emerge victorious after this week is over, the same as ever, eternally our Lord, eternally determined to save the world, eternally committed to us his friends, and with us forever, just as he promised he would be.

But our response continues to be divided. The will and message of Jesus is ignored by people today, just as when he first appeared: “He came to his own, and his own received him not.”

And we who *have* received Jesus continue to offer a “yes and no” sort of response.

This is why this is just as true today as it was when the crowds vilified Jesus to Pilate: “He stirs up the people with teaching.”

Setting aside the responses of people who are not bothered with the message of Jesus, we could say that he stirs people up in two different ways. Now as then.

The first sort of stirring up works in us the way it worked in the younger son, in the parable of the Prodigal Son. What powerful thoughts and feelings roiled in the heart and mind of the younger son when he came to himself, returned home, and was received with love, restored to a home he had never known. He was certainly one stirred up young man, stirred by sorrow for his folly and joy at the love God had showed him and the new life and peace he enjoyed. Good stirring up.

The second sort of stirring up works in us the way it worked in the older son, in the same parable. What powerful thoughts and feelings roiled in the heart and mind of the older son when he realized he had been fooling himself that with all his goodness he was buying the good will of his Father. His mind seethed with comparison after comparison, and he boiled with rage at the injustice of the situation. He could not choke down a morsel of banquet.

Yes, Jesus stirred up the people. He came to turn the hearts of people to their God. Where he succeeded, it was by scraping what was wrong out of people's hearts and supplying a new spirit. Where he failed, it was not because he did not try. But they would not. People who were just going about their business being righteous people were stirred to deep resentment at the peace of God being delivered like free pizza, and they had to put a stop to that, and so . . . not-so-good Friday.

"Jesus stirred up the people with teaching."

Had Jesus simply healed a lot of people and told people how to be good, he would never have been considered a stirrer. Only a "good teacher," which some called him. But because his *single-minded mercy* included all people in its scope, because his inheritance was for all the children, even the ones who had wasted their share already, all "elder brothers" took offense. People want other people to get what they deserve.

It's only fair. But that is what it is: "Only" fair. Not merciful. And the world is not saved by God's justice, but by God's mercy.

Everything Jesus suffered in today's reading we should hear as an account of the price Jesus was willing to pay for the opportunity to stir up you and me by offering God's mercy to . . . us.

Let us pray:

Stir us, Lord Jesus, not to contempt for others, not to prideful comparisons, not to condemnation of the sin of others, not to anger or jealousy; but stir us to repentance of our own folly, and to joy at your unbelievable willingness to allow us to be your children every day. Stir us to see where you are calling us to work. Stir us with your word and with the sacrifice of yourself for us, when we did not know what we were doing; stir us to lives of praise and thanksgiving. Amen.