

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, WA
April 17, 2011
Palm Sunday**

Galatians 6:14

“In the Cross of Christ I Glory”
Hymn 345

Hymns: 130-133-345-714-114

All Scripture quotations from the NIV

May I never boast except in the cross of Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. Galatians 6:14

It's a welcome break, isn't it? The children joyously singing, the palm branches being waved, the shouts of praise. After gathering for all these services in Lent, the church seems a bit brighter, the mood of the service a bit lighter. Thinking back to my younger years, Palm Sunday always had a different feel than all of the other services in Lent. In fact, I always viewed Palm Sunday outside of Lent, maybe even as a sign that the subdued mood of Lent was over. And yet, some of that somber season remains today in quiet reminders. The stripped-down tree still stands behind me. The color adorning that cross and the altar is still purple (the color of the passion). The pastors are still robed in black (reflecting the darkness of our sin).

Personally, Palm Sunday is one of the only festivals in the church year where I'm not sure how I should feel. Easter? Triumphant! Ascension? Eager for a return! Christmas? Joyful like a little kid! Reformation? Thankful! But, what mood is it for the Christian on Palm Sunday? We have the pomp, glory, and fanfare of the triumphant entry. But the meditative, subdued, even forlorn mood of lent is still around.

We certainly want to join with the crowd that welcomed Jesus as he rode into Jerusalem as the humble King. However, we know that the crowd cheered him for the wrong reasons, not

understanding who Jesus was and what he taught and the deliverance he promised to bring. We know that they would turn on him just a few days later. We want to cheer him on as he marches on to victory. But we know pain and betrayal and agony and death are coming. And that has to keep us somber because we know that our constant failings are the cause of the suffering that we will see. But then, back to the other side, we also know what lies ahead at the end of this week, after the painful death. It is Easter! Though, we want Jesus to ride on to that victory.... we also wish that our sin didn't cause it to be that way. Back and forth our emotions go on this Palm Sunday. But which one should it be?

And in that way, Palm Sunday serves as a microcosm of our lives as Christians. The letter to the Philippians tells me that I can be joyful always...but there are many times when I feel no joy. The letter to the Romans assures me that my present troubles are not worth comparing to the glory that will come...yet sometimes those troubles are hard to look past. I celebrate the fact that heaven is my home...but I also become discouraged when the many hardships I must endure to enter the Kingdom of God seem to be one too many. So what is it for the Christian? Pomp, glory, fanfare? Or subdued, struggling, forlorn? Back and forth we often go, struggling to understand how life should go for us here.

But take heart, because there is an answer. And that answer is found in where we look this time of year. Both our hymn for today and the text on which it is based speak to that struggle between glory and pain that we feel as we go through life and to a lesser extent as we gather on Palm Sunday.

For a man named John Bowring, the answer jumped out at him very clearly. John Bowring was a British consul to China and in 1849 he made his first visit to that country by sea. The last stretch of his journey took him past the peninsula of Macao (which is near Hong Kong). In the early 1800's Macao had been a very important trading and missionary center. However, as trade shifted to Hong Kong, so did the people. Macao became somewhat of a ghost town, a hangout for pirates, smugglers and others of ill repute. Wars and vandals succeeded in destroying this once-bustling city. However, as John Bowring made his way past the devastation and destruction, something caught his eye. Rising above the rest of

the city was a bronze cross, shining magnificently in the sun. The rest of the church had been destroyed along with the city, but this cross was all that Bowring could focus on. He wrote hymn 345 *In the Cross of Christ I Glory* after seeing that sight and being reminded what it was all about. As you look at the first verse, the picture that he saw is put to words. **In the cross of Christ I glory, Tow'ring o'er the wrecks of time. All the light of sacred story Gathers round its head sublime.**

Just as clear as that cross was for Bowring, the focus of life was just as clear for the Apostle Paul. As a Christian man, Paul could have boasted about many things. There was his miraculous conversion on the road to Damascus, when Jesus himself appeared to Paul and turned him from his life of persecution. There was the special commission that he was given to be the light to the Gentiles, he was God's chosen tool for mission work. There were the many successful mission trips. How many converts? How many churches founded? He travelled more miles than any other missionary. He wrote more books of the Bible than all the other apostles combined. Yet, as he looked back on his life, there was only one thing that he could focus on as he wrote to the Galatians in chapter 6:14, **"May I never boast (glory) except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ!"** Two different men in two very different situations in life and yet their words are almost identical as they think about their lives on this earth. Why was that shimmering cross such a welcome sight for Bowring as he sailed in the Far East? Why was that scourge of Roman persecution such a source of pride for the Apostle Paul as he journeyed around the Mediterranean world? How does that cross serve to explain the range of emotions that we feel on Palm Sunday; and even more, the way that we feel about life? The answer is found in something we call the theology of the cross.

To call yourself Christian means much more than that you believe in Christ. It means that you put all of your hope and confidence in something that seems foolish to the rest of the world – your Savior God actually died and he did it in an ugly, shameful, painful way upon the cross. And that affects the way that we look at Palm Sunday. As we watch Jesus ride into Jerusalem, we can't help but see that cross in his future. We can't just skip joyfully from this triumphant entry to the Alleluias of Easter. The cross

which is always in front of us won't allow that to happen. That cross that we see is a continuous reminder of our Savior's painful road.

And the cross is also a reminder of our own painful road. This affects the way that we look at our lives because the fact that we have crosses is one of the most difficult truths there is to accept. The truth itself is easy to grasp. It is told to us in many places in Scripture (If anyone would follow me, he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me; All men will hate you because of me; We must endure many hardships to enter the kingdom of God). But understanding and accepting those statements is not. Many come to Christianity and expect that this life is going to be filled only with glory and good. We have this idea that life in Christ is going to completely shield us from the attacks of the devil, the world and our sinful flesh. That is simply not the case. Though there will certainly be a lot of good, there are still going to be plenty of troubles. The temptation at those times is to give up and look elsewhere. The devil is working hard to dampen your flame; he wants you to deny that cross. Yet, when we go through those struggles, the cross is really the only thing that is able to get us through. It is the only thing that will explain why a good and gracious God allows the troubles and the pain. Thankfully, the cross reminds us of the purpose of our pain. It connects us with Christ; it marks us as his followers. The hymnwriter captures that truth in verse 2 as he says, **"When the woes of life o'ertake me, Hopes deceive, and fears annoy, Never shall the Cross forsake me; Lo, it glows with peace and joy.**

The reminders of pain that the cross always brings with it are what keep us a little low-key both on Palm Sunday and in life. We know that the cross will bring pain. Yet, on this Palm Sunday, and throughout life, we know that the cross brings something much more.

For us, Jesus' cross is not final. It has purpose. It was the entire reason why Jesus came to this earth as a true man in the first place. On the cross, he was going to take care of our sin. He was going to win the victory. And so as we look to the cross this Palm Sunday, we see much more than pain, we see assurance of our Savior's triumph. And that brings us unending joy on Palm Sunday. We hail our King and

cheer him on even as we know exactly where he heads.

He rides on to victory and because of that, the cross also brings assurance of our triumph. As we struggle through life, we know that God is keeping his promise. We know that he is shaping and refining our faith so that it will last until we arrive before his throne. Everything that he throws our way in life is to ensure that we experience all the joys of victory which were won on the cross. Knowing the victory that Christ's death on the cross has won allows us to go through life with a glorious joy that can only be experienced by the Christian. Bowring expressed this great truth in verse 3 and 4 of his hymn, saying, **"From the cross the radiance streaming, adds more luster to the day,"** and verse 4, **"Bane and blessing, pain and pleasure, by the cross are sanctified; peace is there that knows no measure, joys that thro' all time abide."**

On this Palm Sunday, as we welcome Jesus into Jerusalem, may the cross remain our focus. It is the banner that Jesus rides on with, it is not something that we can ignore. We know what is coming later this week, yet we shout Jesus' praises with joy. We sing out, "Ride on, ride on in majesty", and we also sing 'ride on to die.' The cross reminds us of pain, but it also assures us of glory. It is to the cross that we look and there we are reminded and assured that Palm Sunday and our entire lives bring temporary pain, but everlasting triumph. So, ***In the cross of Christ we glory.*** Amen

To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.