

Palm Sunday: Year C, April 13-14, 2019: *A Living Memory*

Readings: Matt 21:1-11 (Palms); Isaiah 45:21-25; Psalm 22:1-11; Phil 2:5-11; Luke 23:1-56

And now Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be ever pleasing to you, O Lord, our Rock and Redeemer – amen

I was not raised in the South. I was raised on the West Coast, with my most formative years spent in Seattle. So when I moved to Texas just before my 21st birthday, there was something of a culture shock, to say the least. Now to be fair, Texas is not exactly the South, as any Texan and Southerner will tell you – Texas is its own thing, and Texans are pretty proud of that.

Nevertheless, there is more overlap between Southern and Texas culture than with Texas and the North – hence the culture shock. I say all of this to say that when I look at Southern and Texas cultures, I look as one who has been converted, so to speak, not as a native. Indeed, some of their rituals/customs still seem quite foreign to me.

One such example is the identity that both Southerners and Texans still get from their respective places in the Civil War. Now to be clear, to a person, every Texan and Southerner that I know laments and greaves the tragedy of slavery and Jim Crow Laws, but they still think the war was fought over more than that. Leaving those issues aside for now though, what is especially interesting to me is the force that this one particular historical event has in shaping their cultural identities. So much so, in fact, that one can find certain battles of the Civil War being reenacted on their respective anniversaries throughout the South. These reenactments are quite elaborate too – one might even say that they are ritualistic or liturgical. All the relevant elements – the uniforms, the armory, the timing and places, the words spoken, etc. – have to be properly orchestrated and rehearsed down to the finest detail. To put it another way, many of our Southern/Texas brothers and sisters don't just remember the historical fact of the war as simply another data point, *they live the memory; they participate in it.*

Given the way our Western culture thinks about History and Knowledge since the Enlightenment, it would not be surprising if thinking about remembering as *a living memory* or as *participation* in a past event strikes you as odd. It certainly did me when I first encountered it. But as the church historian, Robert Louis Wilken, and other prominent Christian thinkers through the ages have made clear, this is a central reality of the Christian faith as a way of life. In fact, it has its own fancy Greek word, a word that is found in both Scripture and the Liturgy: *anamnesis*.¹ It means, essentially, "to recall by making present" or "living memory." Perhaps at some point I will have an opportunity to go deeper into it, but, for now, let me say that *anamnesis* is at the heart of the Eucharist, which is at the heart of the Church. Each Sunday we remember Christ's saving actions toward us as we reenact the Lord's Supper believing that Christ is made present to us as we feed on his body and blood. Through the real presence of Jesus Christ made present to us by the grace of the Holy Spirit, we actually participate in the very historical events that we are remembering – Christ Jesus' death and resurrection.

Our Liturgical calendar is designed to facilitate living memory as well. Through the year we are taken through the major events of Jesus' life and our invited to conform our way of living according to the particular season: we celebrate in the seasons of feasting (Christmas and Easter) and we fast in the seasons of preparation (Advent and Lent) as we remember the historical events they recall – we live the memory. This is all the more true in this most holy week of the year – the week we simply call "Holy Week" (we are a clever lot).

Take our liturgy today, for example: In many churches today, they will begin the service outside where they will pray and read the narrative of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

¹ Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, p. 34-36. This is an outstanding book that explains early Christian doctrine in its context and how the early church drew it from Scripture. Wilken is writing to a general audience and, as such, does not employ a great deal of technical jargon. This book is a great place for anyone interested in theology or church history to start.

They will then process together into the sanctuary while signing Hosanna (or some other appropriate hymn). In doing so, they are taking their place in the worshipping crowd as a living memory – they are participating in that very first Palm Sunday. Once inside, and we begin inside because Buffalo and time, we read the narrative of Christ's Passion as a reenactment – we all participated with some role in the reading. Again, in doing so we take our place in the narrative as living memory. In this narrative, however, we are confronted with our place in the crowd calling for Jesus to be crucified. As we participate in the congregation's cry to "Crucify Him!" we remember that it is our sin – my sin – that nailed Jesus to that Cross. He died for us; he died for you; he died for me!

And this is true for everyone, whether they are in Christ or not; but for those of us who have been baptized into Christ through water and the Holy Spirit, there is co-remembrance for us this week – not one that replaces the first, but one that fills it up. On the one hand, we remember that Christ died for us; and on the other, we remember that, through our baptism, *we die with Christ* and that Christ's call to all of us is to pick up our crosses and follow him. Or as Bonhoeffer so eloquently put it: "When Christ calls [us], he calls [us] to come and die."² Indeed, our reading from Philippians makes this claim on us. St. Paul tells us to "have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus...he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." He then clarifies this later in the same letter explaining that the goal of the Christian life – that is, "the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" – is to "attain to the resurrection of the dead" through participating or sharing in Christ's sufferings by being conformed to his death, which chiefly happens on the basis of faith in our baptism. Nevertheless, as is often the case with St. Paul, this is a "now, but not yet" reality: yes, I am conformed, but I am still being conformed. As we make the remembrance of our death in Christ Jesus present to

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, p. 87.

us by living the memory this week, we partner with the Holy Spirit in order to be further conformed to Christ's death in the hope of also participating in his resurrection.

This raises the question: how do we make these memories *living* memories? In closing, allow me to, ever so quickly, make a few suggestions. The first place to start is to realize that this week is holy and to order our lives accordingly. This means that it should be different than the other weeks of the year and should require sacrifice – we are making death present after all. The lowest hanging fruit is to commit to attending the various services that we will be offering throughout the week. Doing so will order your life this week around services designed to remember Christ's death and, thus, your death with him. Another way to make Christ's death a living memory is to fast, which is, in a sense, to impose suffering on ourselves in order to be conformed to the Cross as we share in Christ's sufferings. Finally, commit yourself to some form of study and meditation. Rebecca and I are reading a book this week on the doctrine of the Atonement – that is, the explanation of what Christ did and how he did for us on the Cross. If that sounds like too much, read and reread the passion narratives in the Gospels and turn it into prayer. Doing so will direct your heart and mind toward Christ and his sufferings on your behalf. All these practices and more, in the power of the Holy Spirit, can make Christ's death a living memory in which we participate.

To the glory of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit – amen!