



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, April 5, 2020
Palm Sunday

Solemn Eucharist
at 11:00 a.m.

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Matthew Moretz, *Associate Rector*
on
Philippians 2:1-11 and Matthew 21:1-11
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The Great Mistakes

When you make a mistake, when you make a big mistake, the kind that makes you wince, the kind that hurts, what do you do? How do you move forward?

Well, one way is to pretend like it didn't happen, just avoid the subject. You could even try to forget, hoping that others will, too. Or maybe, you could insist to yourself and to anyone that will hear that it wasn't your mistake. It was someone else's fault. You could even go deep on offense, declare that it was somehow the person's fault that you hurt. With a wave of your hand, you could justify that mistake, declaring it to be something it was not, something that had to happen, something deserved, necessary.

Or, you could face up to it. You could recognize the hand you had in your mistake, declare it as unjustifiable, as sheer folly, and then, on that ground, walk with those who were hurt by that mistake to see what may be next, what can be salvaged.

But this is not the safe path. Perhaps you will need to do something to set things right. Perhaps it will cost you something to repair what you broke. You may lose something; you may lose a lot. But I hope you can see that it would be in the losing that you would gain even more: A life grounded and rooted in the truth. A life trusting in the power of mercy to make broken things new. We talk about mercy all the time in the church, we sing about it, we ask God for it. And every mercy is necessarily preceded by some mistake, isn't it? In fact, God's mercy couldn't happen, without our mistakes happening first.

What if it is not only our successes, but also our mistakes that can be the path to God? This is a well-worn path, and the map we must use to find our way is the record of our retroactive reckoning, a topography of our past folly, the twists, the tangles, the sorrows, the cruelties.

By God's grace, we walk with the truth of our past mistakes as a guide to make our way back to God, the Merciful One. In facing up to our past, we are led to a vantage upon which we may discern God's future for us. And so it is of utmost concern when we turn from our unseemly past, when we paper it over, when we justify it or sell it. When we turn away from that, we're also turning away from God, or at least God's purposes.

If this is how it all works, then how vital it must be to take time together to do this, to face in the right direction, as difficult as it may be, especially in this time of disruption and dispersion. And it's on Palm

Sunday that we do something remarkably difficult, we face one of our most dreadful mistakes of all, in our history the greatest mistake.

On Palm Sunday, we face the heartbreaking wisdom that it was people just like us, Jesus' friends and companions, who fled after years of life-changing loyalty. It was people like us who gloried in Christ's coming to Jerusalem, yet at the changing of the wind turned against him and lashed out with such brutality. It was a collective action of broad scope of all sorts who took a steady journey through folly, injustice, betrayal, and heartbreaking suffering. If we were there, we would have likely seen dear Jesus as an enemy of the state or threat to the faith, or at least to our lives. We would have likely thought Jesus was evil, when he was actually innocent. It is no small thing to remember those people like us who thought they were killing a child of the Devil, but were actually killing God's Beloved Son.

We don't remember all this, though, to beat ourselves up, to hound our hearts into some hole of shame. God has no interest in that. Perhaps, like a vaccine uses a tiny part of a pathogen to inoculate us against a disease, these collective memories carefully dramatized and crafted into worship are meant to inoculate us against those dark forces and passions that ever-threaten to overwhelm us in times of crisis. For it is not only our bodies, but it is also our spirits that need inoculation from certain fevers.

Can we trust ourselves to not get caught up in something like this again? I think that this is the question put to every participant at every Palm Sunday service. Could you weather the temptations the disciples faced, the temptations the crowd faced?

For, indeed, it is so tempting to be afraid as the pressure rises, and then abandon your responsibilities, your friends. It is so tempting in a crisis to have an enemy, to join a crowd and shame and attack. Yet, Palm Sunday reveals the anguish that comes from fear, and the agony that comes from thinking you have found your enemy, when it is really your true friend. We see today that God could be right in front of us, and we could not only miss him, but scorn him. Today is a day to witness how tragically lost one can be, and ask God to save us from that blinding fog.

Our mistakes are meant to repel us, for when seen in the full light they are repellent, and the aversion that comes with remembering them can become not just a repellent, but a propellant, into new life, like smelling salts awakening us out of a bad dream.

For it is not just a great collective mistake that is revealed on Palm Sunday, it is God's love for us in Christ, a love lived out *in extremis*, an indomitable love that somehow keeps growing, with every step on the Via Dolorosa. Somehow, Christ's love shines even brighter at the heart of our darkness, even from the Cross we gave Him.

So today is the day we muster our forces, if not in person, then stationed throughout the world, mustered in the spirit, to witness this love, to look upon dear Jesus, that light shining for us in our darkness, revealing our great folly as he reveals His great mercy. Today we gather in prayer and song, asking God to repel us from our sins and to propel us, wherever we may be, into His loving arms, embraced by the One who made us, is with us, and calls us home.