

# **Palm Sunday**

Michael Battle  
Trinity Church Boston  
April 13, 2025

Lectionary: Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 19:28-40; and Luke 22:14-23:56

When my mother was living, I had an epiphany. This may come across to some as a platitude. To others this may come across as inappropriate for Palm Sunday and should wait until Mother's Day. It was when I was about 8 years old that I had this epiphany; and social psychologists say this is typical of 8 year olds. After a night's dream or should I say nightmare, I woke up in horror. When my mother was still living, I dreamed my mother died. When consciousness washed over me and I realized I was dreaming, I also realized for the first time that I loved my mother. It was as clear as day. Before, in my happy go lucky years before I was eight years old, there was an unawareness of love. Then in the consciousness that she could actually die, my love for my mother became a tidal wave of emotion that changed the way I saw the world.

So, what does this all have to do with Palm Sunday? When I was around the same age, 8 years old, I saw my first Jesus movie—one of the Cecil B Demille ones. It's more accurate to say I didn't really see the movie, I eves dropped in on the movie. Those movies—with people weeping, getting whipped, running for their lives—the scared me to death at 8 years old. So, I made excuses to get up and leave our big box TV. I would go to the refrigerator or to my room to play with my toys. I couldn't stay conscious of the crescendo of violence against Jesus.

I grew up in the black church, and heard some of the best black preachers in my local church—First Cosmopolitan Baptist Church, even Martin Luther King, Sr. preached at my church where I grew up. So, I knew, even at that young age, what would happen to Jesus. As Jesus rode on a donkey toward Jerusalem, in the powerful voice and rhetoric of those black preachers I could hear on Palm Sunday what it must have been like to hear the crowds cheer for Jesus; and I was terrified when they turned on a dime to yell, "Crucify him".

So, near the end of that Cecil B Demille movie, when the Roman soldiers grabbed their whips, I made a beeline toward our big brown Box refrigerator, rummaging in our fridge for no reason.

At 61 years of age, I still have the same associations. I remember seeing Mel Gibson's 2004 film, *The Passion of the Christ*. I was not so much preparing to see it, as I was preparing to critique it. I was shocked and embarrassed when I watched the opening and recurring scenes of Jesus as a boy, stumbling and falling on ground. And when Mary had to pick up her vulnerable little boy, with his skinned knee, I noticed that tears were falling down my cheek. Mel Gibson made me cry. I was crying because, like my mother, I knew that little boy would grow up and die.

Most of you know I am a theologian; so, a dysfunctional Hollywood star like Mel Gibson making me cry, watching his version of the Passion of the Christ, disrupted me sitting on my high horse of prestige. But when I sat down to critique Gibson and watched the movie, what repeatedly came to my mind and heart is a simple thought, "I really love Jesus."

From great Christian teachers and mystics like St. Paul, Julian of Norwich, Simone Weil, Howard Thurman, and of course many more, we learn the lesson that there is a difference between loving Jesus and loving religion. Thurman, an African American Christian mystic, summarizes this well when he writes this in 1949:

I belong to a generation that finds very little that is meaningful or intelligent in the teachings of the Church concerning Jesus Christ. It is a generation largely in revolt because of the general impression that Christianity is essentially an other-worldly religion, having as its motto: 'Take all the world, but give me Jesus.' The desperate opposition to Christianity rests in the fact that it seems, in the last analysis, to be a betrayal of the Negro into the hands of his enemies by focusing his attention upon heaven, forgiveness, love, and the like. It is true that this emphasis is germane to the religion of Jesus, but it has to be put into a context that will show its strength and vitality rather than its weakness and failure. For years it has been a part of my own quest so to understand the religion of Jesus that interest in his way of life could be developed and sustained by intelligent men and women who were at the same time deeply victimized by the Christian Church's betrayal of his faith.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, pp. 29-30.

As nation states around the world justify their actions in the name of religion, we do well to focus on Jesus. We are now focused in our Holy Week observances, which is good and right to do. We are now moving our focus to the palms, the foot-washing, the stripping of the altar, the processional cross, the new fire of the Easter Vigil, flowers and the Easter hymns. But let us remember at the center of it all is Jesus, who reveals that God did not so much love the church, but as more accurately stated in scripture, God so loved the world.

Clint Schnekloth writes in his blog, *Lutheran Confessions, Keeping the Entendre in Double Entendre*:

But I will confess that when I try to write even this simple blog post about Jesus, and think about who Jesus is for me, I start tearing up. It's overwhelming.

So many people I know love Jesus. My Muslim friends love Jesus. My Hindu friends love Jesus. My atheist friends love Jesus. My Buddhist friends love Jesus.

We all get tied up in how we are different, yet if we pause we all realize how united we are in our love of Jesus. And we are united by his love of us. [Jesus}, the human one, the one who was human first, and religious as a distant second.

There's so much more to say about Jesus. There's liturgy to discuss. There are theological conundrums to ponder. Jesus is as much for the mind as he is for the stomach and the heart.

But this week, as much as possible, I pray to stay centered in him. There's just something about Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

This Palm Sunday we move passive aggressively as the crowd in the world. On one hand we shout "Hosanna" when we talk about Jesus. And yet, in the next breath we shout "Crucify Him!" When it comes to Jesus, I encourage us to return to our childlike love and sense of wonder rather than western and American judgments. When we do so, we have the opportunity to move out of passive aggressive behavior and into a more grounded faith that we exist for God. God first loved us. But let's pray that we can actually love God. When we love Jesus, we have the opportunity to resist being a crowd and instead become more of the church God calls us to be.

---

<sup>2</sup> The blog of Clint Schnekloth, *Lutheran Confessions Keeping the "entendre" in double entendre*. March 26, 2013, <http://lutheranconfessions.blogspot.com/2013/03/jesus.html>