

Palm Sunday, St. John's Oneida, 4/10/2022

Today is Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week. Let's begin by looking at the meaning of light and dark, light being the light of day and dark being the dark of night. In the ancient world the difference between the light of day and the dark of night was stark, much more so than today. In the ancient world when the sun set for the day it became utterly dark. If there was no moonlight there would only be an inky blackness, broken only by the occasional cooking fire, torch, or oil lamp. If someone from that era were to step into a time machine and see twenty-first century Manhattan at night he or she would either have a nervous breakdown or they would think the heavenly city, the new Jerusalem, had indeed been established on the Earth-at least until they actually went into the city to mingle with the inhabitants.

It is therefore no wonder that darkness became associated with not only mystery and shadow, or creepy things that go bump in the night, but also with evil and the power of "dark" forces. If we look at our world today through a set of ancient eyes we would see plenty of "darkness". The terrible, brutal invasion of Ukraine, an ongoing pandemic that has taken millions of lives and disrupted many more, our disturbing culture of mistrust and division, crushing poverty, and the pollution of Earth, our island home. There are also good and wonderful things that shine in the light! There are scientific advances that improve people's lives and extend the boundaries of knowledge and imagination, there are inspiring achievements across the spectrum of human endeavor, there is the love we have for God and for each other. And, as astronomer Carl Sagan would have said, there are the "billions and billions" of faithful, charitable, and loving examples of good works generated by the body of Christ on earth. A force of "Light" more powerful than the darkness!

Our own lives are also an interplay of "Light" and "Dark". Family and friends pass away, or we may be diagnosed with a terrible illness. We could lose a job. Families can break apart. On the "light" side, there are weddings and graduations. There are children and grandchildren coming into the world. There are celebrations of all kinds! And everyone knows that it is "our" child or grandchild that will score the winning run or, at least, be the smartest in the class.

The passion narrative we read today is a very condensed and intense portrayal of the last week of Jesus' earthly ministry. It starts with the Light, His triumphant entry into Jerusalem. The "multitude" of disciples implies a big crowd, all of them cheering and praising God. They are laying down palm fronds across the road. Jesus was a man of the people. Not long after, Jesus is betrayed, given over to the "authorities", and instead of an adoring crowd He is doomed by an angry "mob", the flip side of being a man of the people. We see Darkness twice in this narrative, once when Jesus is arrested (This is your hour, and the power of darkness) and after Jesus gives up His spirit on the cross. It was utterly dark from noon to three. That was utterly terrifying back in that time. We aren't just talking about a solar eclipse. It was black. Darkness appeared to have won. We know that is not the end of the story, but in Holy Week we are called upon to experience that range of emotion, from joy to despair and on Easter Sunday, back again. And then some!

Our narrative is from Luke's gospel, and while Luke's gospel has many similarities to the other canonical gospels, it has a particular point of emphasis. In all of Luke, from the first chapter to the last, Luke emphasizes the incredible compassion of Jesus. He spends His ministry among the marginalized of society. These included women, sinners, the sick, the poor,

the oppressed, and tax collectors (!). He even spent some time engaging Pharisees! In our reading today, even in His “darkest” hours, he healed the ear of a slave attending to one of those “authorities” that came to arrest him and promised a berth in paradise to a criminal sharing the agony of crucifixion. The Spirit was with Him indeed. There is something else that we learn from Jesus in the gospel of Luke. We learn how to pray. Prayer penetrates the darkness. The darkness cannot stop it. We can always talk to God. God will always listen. Throughout the gospel, in light and dark times, Jesus prays. Great idea!

I recently read a book written by a Jesuit, James Martin. The title is “How to Pray”, and it is written in a very accessible, conversational style. Bear in mind that there are no strict rules about what position you need to be in or exactly what to say. There is a great deal of individual choice involved. It is also not simply a listing of the various categories of prayer. Those can be found on pages 856-857 in the BCP. Rather, it is concerned with prayers that reveal what is best in us, prayers that ask for things that are manifestly good.

What things are manifestly good? They are not transactional, or asking for rewards for services rendered. They are not hierarchical, or prayers at the expense of others. It is not an exhaustive list, but these are prayers for each of us and all of us together.

Pray for: *Wisdom, to make good choices or courses of action, and to help others do the Same.

*Humility, avoiding vainglory and ambition. Jesus emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave. He had no tolerance for disciples arguing over who is greatest.

*Freedom; from unhealthy patterns of behavior. From bondage. From sin.

*Perspective; to understand what is important and what is not. To remain open to God. Jesus never lost sight of His purpose.

*Courage; it takes courage to stand among the outcasts in society, especially then. Jesus prayed for the courage to complete His mission. Sweating blood! Jesus prayed that His disciples' courage would not fail!

*Patience; to know when and how to act. Jesus was patient with His disciples. He was and is patient with those who seek Him.

*Hope; because life seems bleak sometimes. We have the Hope of the Resurrection!

*Inspiration; of the Holy Spirit, in any time and any place. The Spirit is so Powerful that a murderer and a Roman centurion were moved by it!

*Success; to the extent we do good things well, not at the expense of others. Especially in our ministries!

*Deliverance; from suffering, distress, and evil. Jesus prayed that His friends would not come to the “time of trial”.

As we follow Jesus through the entire gospel and through the crucible of His last week we see Jesus praying for these and other things. I am sure we can think of more. They are prayers for traits that evoke what is best in us. They are prayers for things that we want others to share. They are prayers that penetrate and cut through the darkness because darkness cannot occupy the same space as the Light. Darkness cannot stand the Light. Our prayers define us as the Body of Christ, the Light of the world, and the people of the Resurrection. Amen.

