

**PALM SUNDAY, March 23, 2008**  
**Isaiah 50 :4-9a, Psalm 31:9-16, Philippians 2:5-11, Matthew 26:14-27:66**  
**Prepared by the Rev. Dr. Seamus P Doyle**

The service of palms is over. For a brief few moments we walked and sang “Alleluia.” For a few moments we enjoyed being back in Jerusalem in First century Christian/Judaism walking the roads with Jesus in the lead, riding on a donkey, smiling, waving, not a care in the world. Like the people around him, we too would lay down branches, our coat. We would follow him anywhere. He is the new savior, the new Messiah, the real one this time. We will never desert him. We will never betray him. Joy fills our hearts. A new Spirit is in the air, a new teacher speaks like no one had ever spoken before. He gives sight to the blind, makes the deaf hear, the lame walk, the dead rise. No wonder there is this procession that we are part of! No wonder there is so much joy in the air! This Jesus of Nazareth is heading for the gates of the city of Jerusalem to change the religious-political structure for ever and we are going to be part of it. We may not want to sit at his right or left hand, like a couple of his disciples want to do, but we want to be close to him when he announced his kingdom so we can have our picture in the paper, so we can say, I was there when he entered his kingdom.

As we look around us, men, women and children are running along the road, the singing is getting louder as we draw closer to the city gates. The excitement in the air is breathtaking. Some are wondering what the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the priests are going to do when Jesus rides into the Temple and announces his kingdom. Word is spreading that they want to kill him, they want to get rid of him because he is too well liked by the people. But we are committed to stand by him. We will stand up to his enemies no matter what. We will defend him and protect him. Nothing or no one is going to stop us from helping Jesus bring the kingdom of God, this new Kingdom, to fruition when we reach the Temple.

As we enter the gates we are surprised by another procession. No one told us there was another procession coming into the city from another gate. The atmosphere changes from the excitement of joy and laughter to one of fear. The atmosphere is electric as the tension rises as these two processions move toward one another. Jesus says *Do not be afraid* but that’s easy for him to say, he doesn’t have kids at home. Right there in front of

us is the Roman legion, organized, ruthless, cold as the steel of their shields, ready to kill all of us if the order is given. It would not be the first time they did this.

We did not expect this so soon, so quickly. Choices have to be made. People are gathering their children around them and many are no longer holding up their palms. In fact the ground is littered with palms that suddenly fell to the ground as if a strong wind had blown in. This was not fear, this was evil itself facing us. This is not the time to be brave. Jesus is not going to begin his kingdom today. Maybe we will join him later when it was safer. Now it's time to run.

Betrayal is an interesting concept. It's easy to point the finger at others and call them betrayers, cowards, cheaters, liars. It's important to label them so we can make them the object of our anger and resentment. It's good that we can stand as a model of loyalty while we berate those who have failed to live up to our test of loyalty.

When we listen to the Gospel story we tend to think of Judas as the Betrayer. Yes, He sold out Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. It's so easy to picture him, he looks like those people we see in movies, sleezy, dark, always in the shadows, someone you know you just can't trust.

And yet, Judas was in charge of the purse. Judas was in charge of dispensing money and gifts to the poor. Jesus trusted him. Jesus chose him to be one of his trusted Apostles. Jesus choose to break bread with him before he left the Passover meal. Jesus did not condemn him.

Judas was not the only one who betrayed Jesus that night. Peter not only said he would never deny Jesus, he actually swore he would never deny Jesus. As "poor weak Peter" hung around to see what was going to happen to his leader he denied and swore he knew nothing about Jesus three times.

Perhaps the question for us today is, "What do we have in common with Judas?" How have we betrayed Jesus? In what ways have we turned our back on doing what is right so that we would, like Pilate, have "clean hands."

Throughout the Season of Lent many of our churches use the Litany of Penitence from the Service for Ash Wednesday, in place of the familiar, almost rote, expression of

confession with which we feel comfortable. The Litany of Penitence has a tendency to make explicit that which is implicit in the confession.

We have not loved you with our whole heart, and mind, as strength;

We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves;

We have not forgiven others as we have been forgiven;

We have been deaf to your call to serve, as Christ served us;

We have not been true to the mind of Christ. We have grieved your Holy Spirit;

We confess to you, all our past unfaithfulness, the pride, hypocrisy and impatience of our lives;

Our self-indulgent appetites and ways, and our exploitation of other people;

Our anger at our own frustration and our envy of those more fortunate than ourselves;

Our intemperate love of worldly goods and comforts, and our dishonesty in daily life and work;

Our negligence in prayer and worship, and our failure to commend the faith that is in us;

Accept our repentance, Lord, for the wrongs we have done; for our blindness to human need and suffering, and our indifference to injustice and cruelty;

For all false judgments, for uncharitable thoughts toward our neighbors, and for our prejudice and contempt toward those who differ from us;

For our waste and pollution of your creation, and our lack of concern for those who come after us.

Can any of us say that these statements do not apply to us? Jesus said *As often as you do this to one of these, the least of my brothers and sisters, you do it to me*. In our failure to live up to our Baptismal covenant we, like Judas and Peter, betray Jesus. In our failure to live as Jesus did in word and example we, like Peter and Judas, betray Jesus. Jesus was asked if seven times was enough to forgive one. Jesus replied seventy times seven. This did not literally mean four hundred and Ninety. Rather, it's symbolic for the idea of infinity. God forgives us an infinite number of times for our failings both great and small. None of us is perfect. We may not have had our failures flashed across the national television like so many national figures have had

over the years; we may not have had our names dragged through the mud of tabloids, but nonetheless we have betrayed ourselves, our loved ones and more importantly we have betrayed God by our failure to live up to our baptismal covenant.

Judas returned the thirty pieces of silver and then took his own life. Peter saw Jesus and felt the power of forgiveness. Like Judas we can kill ourselves with guilt and shame; we can bury our God given gifts and talents because we do not feel worthy, good enough, important enough, or too sinful to be forgiven. OR we can feel the grace of repentance, accept it and, like Peter, become a rock for others. Choices, always choices.

What is important is that we learn to appreciate that we are all God's children, we are all human, we all are imperfect and in God's eyes we are all perfect.

Let us Pick up the palms again and wave them high. Let us pick up the palms and understand them to be symbols of the armor of our spiritual lives. Let these leaves, blown in the wind, be a means of grace. Let us see in them a way to open our hearts to the Spirit of God and open ourselves to the light of God within us.

Let us, be like Lazarus, hear the call, *unbind him and let him go*, and leave with a loving God what we cannot understand and go on living. Let us love one another and he has loved us.