

# Sermons at St. Paul's

Palm Sunday

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Carroll Anne Sheppard – Licensed Preacher, Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*

The church's colors of Easter are traditionally white and gold; the color of Lent is somber purple. And isn't it interesting that the world combines these, so that purple and yellow soon will decorate Easter baskets and Easter bonnets? Palm Sunday captures the same collision of moods and colors: the deep purple of mourning and loss, the darkening night, and the approach of dawn's yellow streamers of sunlight across the sky.

The colors purple, gold and white can also represent for us the paradox inherent in the coming week. Jesus, the preacher and teacher who has healed and loved his way through our Gospels, will be trapped between two opposing human powers, the Temple and the Roman Prefecture. The man of God who has opened the door to God's love for millions of people over the centuries will walk through that door to his death once again this Holy Week, burning love into a palpable reality for all who turn to meet him.

Palm Sunday. It has been said that today's liturgy reminds us how fickle we are. Humans can greet Jesus with hymns and palm branches on Sunday and then turn around and say: "crucify him!" a short time later.

I'm not sure that's actually what happens. It may be that the voices shouting "crucify!" are breaking under the weight of opposing human institutions. The shouts may be from people who cannot endure to be the lubricant between the hard rocks of two systems of injustice any longer. Do something, anything to ease our pain, they cry!

It is the voice of those suffering a military occupation of their country, of those who flee in terror from war's violence, of those who would leave, and cannot. If this man's death will remove what we cannot bear, so be it. "Crucify him!" they shout, because perhaps one more death, one more violent offering will stop the casual brutality of our world. Then, of course, they and we discover the fearful truth about scapegoating – no death, no sacrifice will ever appease the power-hungry nature of self-justifying human institutions.

It's a paradox: we yearn with all our hearts for the triumph of love; and we hope against hope that this time, this year, the love we seek and sense will break through the world's pain and grief and violence. And every year, in the last week of Lent, we discover that despite our deep yearnings, the laws and habits of our culture, our government systems and our own actions, lead to the evils we abhor. The reign of love is tantalizingly close – and so far away.

Penn Law professor David Skeel notes in his book, *True Paradox*, that the systems of justice that should have protected Jesus, the Judaic and the Roman, both failed him in their war of power. Jesus was the victim of the very human institutions designed to give shelter to victims of violence and evil. He points out that no legal system is a moral system, no matter how hard humans try to make it so. We look around our world and see so many tragedies, so many failures, so much pain and suffering.

Here's the lesson of Palm Sunday: all human and natural institutions eventually will fail. At some critical instant, when challenged by the force of God's love, they bend, buckle and fold before Almighty God. Jesus walked through these opposing forces, hearing hymns and seeing palm branches on one day, staggering under the weight of his cross five days later, with one goal. He would change the nature of the relationship of humans and God from one of law to one of love. And the world would never be the same.

Many people at many times in their lives reject Jesus, a Jesus they think they know. But the Jesus you reject is the one you have fixated on, a static figure that represents some sense you have that this cannot be the One who will lead you into God's eternal love. And then, by the grace of God, you discover that Jesus is alive, and wants you to share in his love.

Jesus is immortal and alive, and welcomes you in a divine love, beyond law, beyond denomination, beyond any human construction. Where you find this this living Jesus is where you find a community with an unwavering commitment to love, justice and peace. You find the living Jesus in the simple quietness of your heart, the deepest recesses of your being, where you know that God created you for love. That's what today is about – to have you experience this dissonance between the human and the sacred Eternal.

Yes, Palm Sunday holds the full paradox of Jesus' fierce love. He enters our gates, and we rejoice. He insists on love as his standard, and we cling to the legal systems and cultures that seem to offer us protection. He walks to Golgotha and his death, and we mourn that love seems not to have triumphed. He is laid in the tomb, and we are emptied.

But the human end is not God's end. Easter Day will dawn gold and white with God's glory, out of the somber purple of our too human failures. How can this be? How can our failures birth the glory of God? That's the paradox we struggle to understand. It is worth our entire life to find out.

Be of good cheer, my friends! Walk once again this Holy Week, and especially the three days, the Triduum of this story. You walk toward an Easter of renewal and hope. The way of love is the way of self-discovery. It is the way of peace-making and justice. To find the living Jesus is to find love. If the paradoxes of Palm Sunday, the heart-wrenching discoveries of Good Friday, and the silence of Holy Saturday speak to you this year, rejoice! Jesus is walking with you.

***Amen.***