

cPalm Sunday ~ March 28, 2010 ~ A homily preached by The Rev'd Erl G. Purnell at Old St. Andrew's Church, Bloomfield, CT

Luke 19.28-40; Isaiah 50.4-9a; Psalm 31.9-16; Philippians 2.5-11; Luke 22.14-23.49

Sadly, some things never seem to change. Consider hate and fear.

In the domination systems of 1st century Palestine, most Jewish people were under the boot of the Romans, an occupying army; and, under the thumb of the Temple elite who exacted stiff payment for sacrifices of cleansing.

In the case of the Romans, step out of line and you hang on a cross to discourage your neighbors' bad behavior, and for the birds and dogs to pick clean your bones. The intimidation is all about control and money. Don't cause trouble. Pay your taxes.

Regarding the Temple, fail to comply with the purity laws and you're an outcast, an untouchable and unfit to be in the presence of others, let alone loved by the Creator. Again, it's all about control and money.

These penalties were harsh to say the least. Life—the value of human life—was inconsequential. What mattered was power, being in power, in control ... feared. And the forces of domination knew for certain that they were right. No alternative point of view was tolerated. Why? To question the rightful authority of Rome or the Temple? To doubt those authorities?

A turn of phrase I occasionally use describes what was happening then. It's paranoia. You see, only the paranoid are always right. And that's scary. Being right is scary. Encountering people who are absolutely sure they're right is very scary. Who am I if I don't agree? What if I have a different understanding or opinion? Then, of what value am I to the person who is so right?

From time to time I've come up with the right answer on a physics test or a history quiz. That kind of being right is measureable by agreed upon standards. The kind of right that is scary differs from an objective point of view. The right I'm talking about is subjective, from a purely personal, self-serving perspective.

"Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am in trouble," writes the Psalmist. We are all in trouble when fear is marketed as truth and bricks through windows score as points for the "patriotic" team. Later, the Psalmist says, *"For I have heard the whispering of the crowd; fear is all around; they put their heads together against me; they plot to take my life."*

The madness. The great divide between paranoids and progressives burns with hate and fear. Rhetoric is about the death of freedom and the sacrifice of individual rights on the one hand and inclusiveness, fairness, and compassion for *ALL* on the other.

The image of burning is not too strong. I remember the 1960's when whole cities burned, "negroes" were lynched, raped, and shot, a war ripped at our guts, post offices were bombed, and more than a few questioned authority.

Yet, these times today are different. What divides respectful discourse and dialogue now smells different. It stinks of a new version of hate and fear. Well, not really a new version, but rather a repackaged, modernized hate and fear mongering. It's *US* verses *THEM*. Those who are *RIGHT* verses those who are *WRONG* and, so, to be excluded, marginalized, cast aside ... killed. We've seen it before in history ... we're seeing it again, and not just in the U.S.

One party being right—absolutely right—births fascism, jihad flourishes, occupied peoples are brutalized and oppressed. And, such an attitude is daily rationalized and justified. The insidious worms of these movements spread in cliques and at rallies until suddenly they emerge with guns through the thin skin of normal social propriety and legality to claim their right to power.

Today we start Holy Week. This week represents the story of unchecked oppression and domination. We relive the horror of Jesus' betrayal, the brutality of murder, the suppression of hope. Not a pretty picture. Not a happy time.

Of all the things Jesus teaches, one that always holds my attention is his admonition to *stay awake*. He tells several parables to illustrate the importance of staying awake, being alert, being ready, keeping your wicks trimmed and your lamps filled. Then, on that fateful night, what happens with Peter, James and John? They fall asleep. They let go. They stop caring about being attentive to what's happening.

Amen.