



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Right Reverend Dean Elliott Wolfe, D.D., *Rector*

The Essence of the Passion

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, April 5, 2020

Palm Sunday

Based on Luke 19:28-40, Philippians 2:5-11, Matthew 27:11-54 (The Passion Gospel)

*In the name of the One who died,
that we might have life. Amen*

One of the challenges of preaching is to be able to place the listener in the context of the biblical story. In an ordinary time, it is often difficult for people to imagine the realities of the death of Christ. But this, we all know, is no ordinary time.

In ancient Rome, the crucified were nailed to a cross through their wrists and feet. According to a number of sources, crucifixion caused the victim to work constantly to breathe, so death eventually came by suffocation for most victims. Jesus died slowly and painfully and in a manner less unimaginable than it was only a few weeks ago. Yes. We can imagine it.

This is Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week: that slow walk through the last days and the most crucial teachings of Christ. Palm Sunday has always possessed a kind of schizophrenic quality to it. The liturgy begins by remembering how the crowds cry, "Hosanna!" and it ends up by remembering how the crowds cry, "Crucify him."

My old friend, now of blessed memory, The Reverend Peter Gomes, preached a Palm Sunday sermon at Harvard University where he proclaimed, "God's love is the only thing that makes sense out of suffering, conflict, and tragedy. God's love does not do away with conflict, or suffering, or tragedy; the cross should teach us that. God's love does not do away with it, God's love is the thing that makes it possible to bear it, to see it, to share in it, to understand it, and to pass through it. That is the truth of the gospel, that is the essence of the Passion."ⁱ

At first it was a relative of someone I knew who had contracted the virus. Then it was someone in our building, but on another floor. Then it was someone I knew. Then it was someone I knew well and had seen recently. Then it was someone with whom I work. It keeps getting closer.

And it seems that we have two choices. This is a virus that certainly demands our respect, but we can either be terrorized by it, or we can live our lives like we are the people of faith we are always seeking to be.

- If you are able to leave the city to find shelter in the country, there's no reason for you to feel guilty. But be generous with those people and institutions who are fighting every single day to care for people who did not have the resources to leave. You could start off by offering greater support to this church and to our feeding programs.

- If you are frightened and holed up in your apartment, there's no reason to feel guilty about that, but pray diligently for those who deliver your food, and stock your groceries, and for those who are even now risking their lives in order to care for the sickest among us. Pray that God gives you the strength and the courage to help someone else in whatever way you can.
- If you do become infected, there is no use in feeling guilty. As my grandfather would have said, "That's just wasted paint." Do whatever you can to keep your illness from spreading to others and pray God restores you to fullness of health as soon as possible. Say your prayers, follow the medical wisdom of healthcare professionals, and be reminded that those words we spoke on Ash Wednesday have meaning: *Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.* We are, each of us, only given so many days on this planet, so don't live another single day of your life like your life isn't the most special gift that's ever been given to anyone!
- If you somehow feel invincible and see no real reason to practice the precautions we're all urgently being asked to follow, and if you believe God will somehow spare you this virus, I invite you to get on your knees and humbly ask for God's forgiveness, because pandemics are no respecter of persons. Heads of Nations, famous athletes, film stars, clergy, doctors, firefighters, policemen, nurses, saints, sinners, everyone, anyone, can contract this virus.
- And, if you are on the front lines of this pandemic. If you are a doctor or a nurse or a healthcare worker, if you work in a grocery store or a pharmacy, if you deliver food or prescriptions to people, if you are a police officer, fire fighter, or Emergency Medical Technician, or if you are in any other profession where you are working at risk to yourself for the sake of others, know that you are blessed of God and prayed for. Know that you are admired and respected by the people of this great city who are depending on you every hour of every day.

These next weeks are going to test our faith. People who always say their prayers and people who never say their prayers will become ill. And some will die. And where, you may ask, will God be?

Well, I believe God is now and will be in the very midst of all of it. No, I do not understand why there are pandemics—or mosquitoes for that matter. I will never understand why good people die too young and wickedness appears to thrive. I can only recall God's answer to Job who had an honest bone to pick with God. When God finally answered Job, God said,

*Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
Who determined its measurements—surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?
On what were its bases sunk,
or who laid its cornerstone
when the morning stars sang together
and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?*

I don't believe things like this happen for a reason. I don't believe this is God's punishment on New York City or on any individual struck by this illness. I do, however, believe that extraordinary and holy things often come out of terrible situations and great tragedies.

- People shout in one voice at 7:00 pm every evening in my neighborhood, and perhaps yours, to give thanks and praise to all of those who are on the front lines of this epidemic.
- There are people making meals and running errands and making calls just to check in. There are volunteers who make it possible for some 2500 meals to be distributed to hungry people who would have nowhere else to go if risks weren't taken and compassionate care provided.
- There are medical professionals who are risking everything to care for the sick in this pandemic.

Remember what Dr. Gomes had to say? *“God’s love does not do away with conflict, or suffering, or tragedy; the cross should teach us that. God’s love does not do away with it, God’s love is the thing that makes it possible to bear it, to see it, to share in it, to understand it, and to pass through it. That is the truth of the gospel, that is the essence of the Passion.”*ⁱⁱ

Amen.

ⁱ Peter J. Gomes, *Sermons; Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, William & Morrow Co., New York, New York, c.1998, page 70.

ⁱⁱ Ibid, page 70 .

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