



PALM SUNDAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

Sunday, April 17, 2011

Don Darius Butler, Guest Cultural Resources Commentator
Pastor, Tabernacle Community Baptist Church, Milwaukee, WI

I. The History Section

Palm Sunday (or the Sunday of the Passion) is the celebration that falls on the Sunday preceding Resurrection Sunday (Easter). It commemorates the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, days before he meets his fate of crucifixion. All four Gospel writers narrate the event: Matthew 21:1-11, Mark 11:1-11, Luke 19:28-44, and John 12:12-19. The collective report of the biographers recalls Jesus' stay in Bethany. There, he dispatches two disciples to go and get a

donkey that had been tied up, never ridden, and bring it to him. As Jesus rides the animal into Jerusalem, a throng of supporters throw their clothes and small tree branches in the pathway to welcome him into the city. Echoes of Psalm 118 ring out, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord...”

In the history of Christian thought, this entry, and its jubilant reception, affirmed the messianic expectations heaped upon Jesus. The narrative is interpreted as fulfillment of Zechariah’s prophecy:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
He will cut off the chariots from Ephraim
and the war-horse from Jerusalem;
and the battle bow shall be cut off,
and he shall command peace to the nations;
his dominion shall be from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth. (Zechariah 9:9-10)

In the Christian liturgical tradition, Palm Sunday is marked with either a procession at the beginning of the worship service or some waving of palm branches/leaves in the service proper. Dramatic readings of the passion narrative feature prominently in the liturgy, and worshippers are invited to reflect upon the scenes and themes that the following days unfold. The moment concludes the observance of Lent and inaugurates the solemnity of Holy Week.

II. Cultural Responses

The lection psalm for the day bids us to join the history of supporters who salute Jesus, the one whose rejection is reversed and who is now revered. This is an easy invitation to accept. The story-canon of black people is replete with narratives of fortune reversals and vindication. The significance of black religion on North American soil figures chiefly among those narratives. In its nascent form, this religious tradition was deemed tribal, without intellectual foundation, ephemeral, etc. Now those within the tradition, along with those who observe the tradition, affirm this experience as one that has been redeeming America’s soul.

As for personal narratives, the introduction of Rodney Alphonso Thomas’s 2009 cultural commentary on this celebration recalls the righteous vindication of South Africa’s Nelson Mandela in 1994.¹ The entire world witnessed the 27-year political prisoner’s release and his subsequent ascent to presidential power. It is an inspiring story of courage, endurance, forgiveness, and triumph.

Even the narrative of President Barack Obama’s fortunes during the 2008 campaign for the United States presidency illustrates the point. While President Obama enjoys widespread support among black voters, that was not the case immediately preceding and following the February

2007 announcement of his candidacy in Illinois. He was not widely celebrated, especially by black constituents. Leslie Fulbright's 2007 article "Obama's candidacy sparks debates on race: Is he African American if his roots don't include slavery?" chronicles the tepid-to-hostile response Obama received.² In the article author and Princeton University professor Cornel West said, "Obama's decision to announce in Illinois instead [of appear at Tavis Smiley's State of the Black Union] shows he 'speaks to white folks and holds us at arm's length.'" ³ Former presidential candidate the Reverend Al Sharpton articulated his displeasure in the timing of the announcement in the following statement: "We cannot put our people's aspirations on hold for anybody's career, black or white. Just because you are our color doesn't make you our kind."⁴ Polls reflected the skepticism that black voters held about a candidate whose ethnic identity had become fodder for every dotting journalist obsessed with the matter in mainstream American media.

Conversely, after Obama won the Iowa Caucus, black people started to give him a second look. Suddenly, he became a viable candidate in their eyes. And of course, by the time he clinched the nomination and won the general election, the hopes and dreams of black freedom-fighters and aspirations of their young came to rest upon his shoulders. That was a stunning reversal!

Palm/Passion Sunday is, at the core, a day of transition. It marks a significant turning point in the ministry of Jesus—one that should never be separated from the observance of the day. Yes, Jesus is lauded with messianic adulation, but in a matter of days, adulation turns into chants for his crucifixion. While the aforementioned stories narrate transitions for the better, the transition that occurs for Jesus is not the same. It is a change that demands the sacrifice of his life. This is an important testimony in the lives of ebony people who committed themselves to the spirit and like-ministry of Jesus and met a similar fate.

Moreover, Palm/Passion Sunday is a day of contrast. In the same way it transitions us from celebration to Jesus' Passion, it reflects upon our ambiguous participation in the joy and the sorrow of both experiences. And it is this ambiguity that we are most often unprepared to examine. We can judge the duplicitous actions of the cheering crowd turned jeering mob but cannot apply the same measure to our moral complicity. Perhaps the following reflection will afford us such an entry.

III. Stories and Illustrations

The clearest biographical narrative which parallels the significance of this moment, in light of the coming passion, is that of Martin Luther King Jr. King was a celebrated son of the black church, even though he found no refuge in the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. (at the time the largest black denomination). His legendary dream articulated on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963 still reverberates in our imagination. This address is rivaled perhaps only by what became a self-fulfilling prophecy in his last speech at C. H. Mason Auditorium in Memphis, Tennessee. Lost in the mastery of his oratory, we seldom behold the complexity with which he struggled, particularly in the last three years of his life.

America's involvement in the Vietnam War marked a turning point for the non-violent prophet. His field of moral vision expanded from the parochial fight for civil rights to the larger injustice

of oppression against the world's people who struggle for freedom wherever it was denied. Such a move was not applauded. King lost the support of President Lyndon B. Johnson and many congressional leaders. Bayard Rustin, a trusted confidante and strategist, eventually resigned because he thought King's goals were too unrealistic. And other lieutenants in the movement urged King to concentrate on the movement for civil rights. This evolution in King's social hermeneutic is reflected in his speech *Beyond Vietnam*, delivered April 4, 1967 at the Riverside Church in the City of New York.

Both Jesus and King made clear transitions in their ministries toward economic interests and were met with fierce hostility. Jesus goes to the temple following his entry into Jerusalem and wages a holy war. This critique at the heart of the mercantile practice of life in the empire could not go without response. Thus, the plot for his life thickens. It was the same with King. He called America "the worst purveyor of violence in the world" and challenged the wisdom of her investment of billions of dollars in foreign wars rather than at home. This could not go without challenge either.

What Palm/Passion Sunday represents in light of the witness of these moral leaders is an opportunity to connect with the expansion of their field of moral vision. The occasion to celebrate is explicit, but the chance to connect with the deeper spirit of their ministries, even in the coming passion, is inherent.

IV. Songs That Speak to the Moment

The standard spiritual for this liturgical moment is "Ride On, King Jesus." Its principle premise affirms Jesus' conquering prowess. While the Gospel records the beast to be a donkey, the spiritual sings of horse, a majestic animal fit for king. It also includes more imagery than what the Gospels narrate. This spiritual connects Jesus' triumphant entry with the larger purpose of his ministry, a movement that conquers whatever stands against life. And it includes a tacit invitation for us to find the way of God by following a similar path.

Ride on, King Jesus
No man can a-hinder me
Ride on King Jesus, ride on
No man can a-hinder me

I was young when I begun
No man can a-hinder me
But now my race is almost run
No man can a-hinder me

King Jesus rides on a milk white horse
No man can a-hinder me
The river Jordan he did cross
No man can a-hinder me

If you want to find a way to God
No man can a-hinder me
The gospel highway must be trod
No man can a-hinder me

When I get to Heaven gonna wear a robe
No man can a-hinder me
Gonna see King Jesus sittin' on the throne
No man can a-hinder me

Gonna walk over those streets of gold
No man can a-hinder me
Goin' to a land where I'll never grow old
No man can a-hinder me.

A rendition of the song is sung by Jesse Norman in the video below.

YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QmRII3UwX2c>

Since Palm/Passion Sunday is connected to Jesus' larger ministry of love and liberation, there must be a call for worshippers to engage in such activity. The spiritual "Go Down, Moses" speaks to the archetype of Jesus' work. At the heart of the Roman imperial power, Jesus seeks the salvation of people oppressed by that power. At every point, he affirms his ministry in acts of solidarity with those who lived at the margins.

When Israel was in Egypt's land
Let my people go
Oppressed so hard they could not stand
Let my people go

*Go down Moses
Way down in Egypt land
Tell old Pharaoh
"Let my people go"*

"Thus spoke the Lord" bold Moses said
Let my people go
"If not I'll smite your first born dead
Let my people go

No more in bondage shall they toil
Let my people go
Let them come out with Egypt's spoil"
Let my people go.

A rendition of this song is provided by Paul Robeson in the video below.

YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gtLcELU1brA&feature=related>

I offer this final song, “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” so that we might help worshippers make the connection between Jesus’ triumphant entry and his subsequent passion. The path for him on that day was filled with clothes and branches. But the path for African Americans is watered with the tears of ancestors and the blood of martyrs. More explicitly, this song connects the way of Jesus’ entry with the *Via Dolorosa*, his way of suffering.

Verse three

Stony the road we trod,
Bitter the chast’ning rod,
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;
Yet with a steady beat,
Have not our weary feet
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?
We have come over a way that with tears has been watered,
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered,
Out from the gloomy past,
‘Til now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

A rendition of this song is provided by Marie Vincent in the video below. In a reversal moment, Ms. Vincent decided to sing the Black National Anthem instead of the Star Spangled Banner.

YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gQtse2B4Khk&feature=related>

V. Making It a Memorable Moment

The meaning and significance of this worship experience may be enhanced through visual and audio aids. The use of imagery that depicts the triumphant entry and the passion can be put side-by-side. This makes the point that celebration, for Jesus, is not without impending sorrow. At the beginning of the worship, willing participants can join the procession with palm branches around the sanctuary, and in the service a reading can be used which chants the words screamed by the crowd. Again, this will bring humanity’s moral duplicity before the congregation.

Notes

1. Thomas, Rodney Alphonso, Jr. “2009 Palm Sunday Cultural Resource.” Online location: <http://www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org/PopupCulturalAid.asp?LRID=77> accessed 20 January 2011

2. Fulbright, Leslie. “Obama’s candidacy sparks debates on race: Is he African American if his roots don’t include slavery?” Online location: <http://articles.sfgate.com/2007-02->

[19/news/17232968_1_african-americans-black-mayors-black-candidate](#) accessed 20 January 2011

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.