

**Sermon preached at Grace Epiphany Church, Philadelphia  
16 March 2008**

*Palm Sunday: Ps 31:9-16; Isa 50:4-9a; Mt 26:36—27:54*

*Thomas Eoyang*

I happened to be watching American Idol recently (don't ask), and the assignment for all the singers was obviously to perform Beatles songs. Someone with a gorgeous, full voice sang "Nothing's going to change my world." He sang with such tonal quality and such feeling that it simply sounded all wrong—at least for those of us who were around to see and hear the boys from Liverpool. Their voices were not all that pure in tone, not all that precise, or all that powerful, but their voices were tinged with a kind of tentative innocence that we longed to believe in back then in the early sixties, not knowing what would soon explode in our faces.

Who of us could tell that the one assassination would be followed by others, and that together they would numb our souls? Could we have guessed that different groups, especially African Americans and women, would tell us loud and clear that they were not going to tolerate their oppression any longer? Mass marches on Washington became a ritual for all kinds of great causes: the protests against racism, sexism, the oppression of gay and lesbian people, and war. These marches let us all know that there were a lot of angry and fed-up people out there. Most of these fights, if not all of them, have still to be won—forty, fifty years later. War, environmental degradation, nuclear proliferation, economic dislocation, and, yes, the continuing evils of racism and sexism, have grown ever more bewildering, ever more terrifying in the decades since the Beatles sang their silly little love songs. So much in fact has changed—by design and by the simple march of history—and also so little has changed. And so the American Idol contestant's conviction as he sang, "Nothing's going to change my world" sounded both utterly absurd and utterly ironic on planet Earth in 2008.

What do we imagine the crowd by the side of the road was thinking and feeling as they shouted "Hosanna in the highest"? Were they thinking their world was about to change? Were they welcoming a conquering hero who would soon liberate them from the domination of the Romans? Did they not notice that he was riding into town not on the back of a fiery war horse leading a victorious army, but on a donkey at the head of a rag-tag bunch of ex-fishermen and common folk?

Or was the crowd welcoming a renowned miracle worker who would somehow channel God's power (or was it magic from other source, and maybe they didn't care?), channel some power to better their lives—cure their illnesses, feed them, and even bring their loved ones back to life—as the reports about him all seemed to say? Did they think their world was going to change? And were they horribly, miserably disappointed when a week later they saw their hero hanging in agony, humiliated and naked, between two ordinary criminals? Oh, that crowd: poor misguided people, poor gullible fools.

Just a word about the crowd, the people who shouted "Hosanna" at the beginning of the week, and the people who screamed "Crucify him" at the end of the week: It's possible to think it was the same crowd, manipulated by the powers that be and fickle in their affections. That's how many people have understood them through the centuries. But we need to be aware that thinking of the crowd in this way has led directly to hateful and violent anti-Semitism in our Christian history.

And so some scholars have offered a different view, and have studied and imagined the context of that time and place, and they've concluded that the crowd shouting "Crucify him" in Pilate's courtyard could not have been the same as the crowd lining the streets of Jerusalem. There could not have been more than a couple of dozen people in that courtyard, and they were probably hand-picked followers of the Temple establishment, people who stood firmly with the high priests and wanted Pilate to think that Jesus was condemned by popular demand.

These scholars lead us to consider that the second crowd and the first crowd were different groups of people. And so we can only imagine how that first crowd, that jubilant faithful crowd lining the streets of Jerusalem came to break their hearts one week later.

This most Holy Week of our church year asks us to exercise our imaginations on the momentous events of that singular week so long ago. Through the services of this week, coming to a climax next Saturday night and Sunday morning, we not only recite the central story that lights our lives as Christians, we relive it through gesture and song and prayer, and most of all through our imaginations.

Our liturgy asks us to cast ourselves in the role of both crowds, the one at the beginning of the week and the one at the end. That first crowd couldn't see quite how or when their world would change, but their shouts of joy ring out for us to this day, and we shout with them, even though we do know what comes later on in the week. We shout because the earthly Jesus entering the city of Jerusalem lets us imagine the risen Christ entering once again into our lives. We know that as frightened and as heart-broken as they were to see their hero hanging naked on the cross, his followers were revived by the Holy Spirit descending on them and were led to reconstitute Christ's broken body as the Church, as Christ's new body in the world.

And that second crowd, that angry snarling crowd whipped up into self-righteous loathing of the trouble-maker in their midst. Can we not imagine ourselves as that crowd, too? Can we not feel their whispered fear?—frightened by their own powerlessness; frightened that the power of the Roman governor in front of them seemed so much more real, so much more present than the power of the God they had praised and worshipped through centuries beyond number; frightened that all hope of justice and compassion had been bled completely out of the world; so frightened that they had to turn their panic and their rage on someone, and the weakling who stood before them, silent and broken, whipped and mocked, seemed like a safe bet. Get rid of him, clueless donkey-riding trouble-maker, and perhaps we can avoid more trouble.

Do we think we might have made a different choice? Well-fed Roman governor in luxurious robes of state, or the naked bleeding nobody with the mocking crown of thorns on his head—who among us could claim that we would have recognized God in that person?

But that's exactly where that person asks us to look for God—in the powerless, in the broken, in the despised, in the bullied and the mocked. And for those who managed to learn to do that, the world did change, little by little, sometimes one step forward and two steps back, but it changed in big ways and small ways. For those who managed to learn who this person was, how God was made flesh in this person, their faith led them to imagine the kingdom that God never stopped promising, the kingdom where the despised would be lifted up, where the hungry would be fed, where the sick would be cared for.

Their faith led them to imagine a world where justice, reconciliation, and compassion would be active forces, and not empty hopes smothered by the overwhelming power of empire and wealth and privilege. Their faith led them to imagine that the voiceless could be given a voice, that the oppressed could be freed from their oppression, and that the weak and despised could come into their full dignity as children of God.

As we follow our central story in this our most holy of weeks, pray that we can imagine for ourselves where this donkey ride, where this journey of faith leads us. Pray that we can still imagine the God who humbles himself in weakness, the God whose loving-kindness will save us from our enemies—and from ourselves. Pray that we can imagine that God. Pray that we can see and imagine all the people who need that God. Pray that we can imagine the world that God promised us. With word and song and gesture, with all the tentative innocence, and idealism, and hope that we can muster, pray that our faith will lead us to imagine. Imagine.