

lished power because they had a special court, or pew (!), reserved for themselves. And who does Matthew say that Jesus brought into the temple? Some children as well as the lame and the blind - all people who had been excluded by those in power.

If we are to be the church of Jesus Christ, this needs to be a place of gracious compassion where we honor the next generation, heal the broken, and give a vision of hope to those blinded by despair. But the place to start is with our own blind despair. What is it that is blinding you from seeing the power of Christ Jesus on Palm Sunday? What is preventing you from experiencing real change?

Have you told yourself that a vaguely dissatisfying life is good enough? Like the Pharisees and Sadducees, are you, too, committed to arguments that don't really matter? Or do you really think that the next plan to rearrange your life can make a difference?

The point is not that you have to be sick or poor to be a Christian. But like them, you have to come to believe that only Jesus can save you. That means that you have to let go of your control of life, you have to stop thinking of yourself as a consumer of change, and you have to give up having it your way. But that is only so you can join the great procession of those who sing: "Hosanna! Save us Jesus. Whatever the cost to our lives, and whatever the cost to our temple - please, save us."

Until you can join that crowd, you're not ready to begin Holy Week. Amen.



April 1, 2007
Palm Sunday

Matthew 21:1-17
Do You Really Want Change?
M. Craig Barnes

Today is the beginning of Holy Week - the day Jesus comes to town, and the day we realize how much it costs to receive the changes he brings.

It is late at night. You are tired but decide on a little television before going to bed. A commercial comes on that says, "Drive this car and feel the freedom." And you find yourself thinking, "I could use some freedom." Then another commercial appears peddling hamburgers, and it claims that you should have it your way. You think, "That would be a change." This last commercial has made you hungry, so you go to the kitchen to grab a snack. Then you return with your bowl of ice cream and chocolate syrup to sit in front of the TV, only to hear another commercial tell you that you're overweight and should try their new diet plan. Now you're not enjoying having it your way as much you did.

A long, long time ago, the Madison Avenue marketing firms discovered nothing sells quite like change. But the people they are targeting in their commercials are not those in crisis who care little about advertisements. Their commercials are written for us - who are only vaguely dissatisfied with life and would love for it to be a little bit different.

Whenever pastors gather for continuing education seminars, it isn't long before an expert gets up to warn us that people resist change. That isn't exactly true. What we all resist is *unwanted* change. But most of our wanted changes are really nothing more than efforts at rearranging our lives. We leave one job and start another with a similar company that only has a different name. We sell one house and buy another. We stop dating one person and start dating someone else. Things may look a little different for a while, but it's the same person who keeps showing up in the mirror.

Sometimes people begin to look into spirituality thinking it's another product to try. But they will soon discover that Jesus isn't interested in helping

us rearrange our lives. He wants to change us, transform us, and give us a new identity. He wants to give us his own identity as a beloved child of God. According to the Scriptures, everything is now different. The old has passed away. Behold all things have become new. You are no longer manipulated by guilt, compulsiveness, hurts from the past, or fantasies about the future. All of that is in the past. Your life is free for a new future.

The fascinating thing in Matthew's Gospel is that the people who have the hardest time accepting this transformation are all religious.

By the time Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, the temple had grown into a huge complex that accommodated the various interests of the religious establishment. The Pharisees, who were very worried about religious purity, appreciated the structural divisions in the temple. There was a secluded court for Gentiles, another court for women, a third one for Jewish men, and a special court for the priests. No one had to get contaminated by anyone else. The Sadducees were pretty liberal theologically, but as aristocrats they were social conservatives. They enjoyed special privileges under the Romans, and they ran the temple which kept them powerful and wealthy. The Sadducees thought the Pharisees were crazy fundamentalists, but at least they could work together in resisting change.

If you would have asked either party, they would have told you that they were a diverse congregation. "See," they would say, "we have both Sadducees and Pharisees here. Oh boy, it's tough, but we hold it all together because we believe in diversity." What that really means is that long ago both parties had settled into familiar arguments. And the real function of their little, theological arguments was to distract them from the real problems of their society. Namely, the country was being oppressed by an occupying army, the Messiah still had not come, and the people were hungry, sick, and very poor. Nothing ever changed for the poor.

According to the old prophets, few things anger God as much as when our theology and worship distract us from the sacred mission of bringing salvation to all the people. But to be clear, the reason God is so concerned about our distracting arguments is not just because they prevent us from caring for the poor. The poor have their own place in God's heart, and if the houses of worship do not care for them, God will find another way to bring them relief. The reason God is concerned about us is because he wants to bring real change into the lives of us religious folk. And that will never happen until we find room in our lives for the poor. God doesn't ask if we care about the poor, or about our politics over urban issues, which only digress into more distracting arguments. What God asks is do we know anyone who is poor? Have we made room in our lives and in our congregation for those who are traditionally not found in the temple?

One day up on the Mount of Olives, a parade developed that made its way to the gates of the city. Jesus of Nazareth was riding a donkey. "A very large crowd" of people was placing palm branches and their cloaks on the ground before him. And they were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest heaven."

This crowd had come from places like Galilee, Jericho, and Bethany. It probably included the formerly blind Bartimaeus, Zacchaeus the tax collector, and Lazarus who had been raised from the dead. It certainly included hungry people whom Jesus had fed, sick people he had healed, and sinners he had forgiven. According to Matthew, it is this crowd that is shouting, "Hosanna," which means "Our Savior." But notice that according to the text, the city is not joining in the parade. "When he entered Jerusalem," Matthew writes, "the whole city was in turmoil."

Matthew makes a clear point of distinguishing the crowd from those in Jerusalem. The crowd is on the move, but those who ran the city were settled. The crowd was looking for all the salvation it could get. They had so much to gain from Jesus. Those who had a good thing going in town had so much to lose from Jesus.

Once we've made a deal with how it is, and get something that is good though vaguely dissatisfying for ourselves, all we want is some rearranging of life. "I just want a new job," we say. But those who are poor, including those who are poor in spirit, want a savior. When you have confronted your poverty of spirit—saying, "I'm tired of making the same mistakes over and over. I've grown weary of going to bed with anxieties only to awaken with the same worries that accompany me through the day"—it is then that you are ready to take your place in the Palm Sunday crowd welcoming a savior.

It had been 150 years since Jerusalem had seen a parade like this. The Greek conqueror Antiochus Epiphanes had overrun Jerusalem, and with incredible contempt he desecrated the temple by sacrificing a pig on the high altar. Nothing could be more horrifying to the Jews. When the Jewish liberator Judas Maccabees entered the city, the crowds laid palm branches before his horse and sang Psalms to God giving thanks for their deliverance.

So why was Jerusalem in turmoil over Jesus' arrival? Because they knew what a palm procession meant. It meant that the temple had been desecrated, and that a savior had to come to clean it up. And the people of the city didn't think they needed a savior. But the crowd just kept shouting, "Hosanna, a Savior is coming. Hosanna, things are about to change."

You know how the story goes. The first thing Jesus did when he got to town was to go straight to the temple. He threw out all the people who had estab-