

Beginning at chapter 12 we come to the last week of Jesus' life, and our passage is the final teaching of Jesus' public ministry. Chapters 13-17 are his last instructions to the disciples; 18 and 19, Jesus before the high priest and Pilate, and the crucifixion; 20 and 21, the resurrection appearances. Chapter 12 is the entry into Jerusalem and this scripture immediately follows, so we need to read these verses with that context in mind. We usually say this is the *triumphal* entry into the city, with the crowds proclaiming him "King of Israel"- something they have wanted to do since chapter 6, after Jesus had fed the 5,000 with the five loaves and two little fish; the Pharisees watch the happy, shouting crowd and tell one another that there is nothing they can do- "the whole world has gone after him," they say. We read some distinctive features in John's account of the procession: only in this gospel do we find that the crowd waves palm branches; we see here that the crowd has gathered because they want to see Lazarus, whom Jesus just a few days earlier had raised from the dead. John's gospel is the only one that doesn't have Jesus going immediately to the temple. It is all the way back in chapter 2 that John has Jesus throwing over the tables of the money changers and chasing everyone out of the temple courtyard, but here Jesus enters the city and then, all of a sudden, no one

knows where he is. Some people want to see him, but they have to ask a couple of disciples, Philip and Andrew, and they go to tell Jesus somebody is looking for him. This is where our passage begins. These verses are Jesus' response to people who wish to "see" him- a key word in the gospel that means, "come to a true knowledge of God," or understand what Jesus' life and teachings and death are really about." But we need to keep in mind all that's just happened: the helplessness of the Pharisees, the shouting and acclamation, the popularity of Jesus and the jubilation of the crowd. It looks like Jesus is winning, doesn't it? But do his words in our text support our usual understanding of Palm Sunday? We should keep in mind the political tension in Jerusalem at Passover time. People from all over the Mediterranean and the Near East, tens of thousands, have come to Jerusalem, and some of them want to revolt against Rome.

I have just learned these last couple of weeks. There is in some denominations, a new way of observing this day on the church calendar. It is being called Passion Sunday now, as well as Palm Sunday, and perhaps in some places one year the church may celebrate Jesus riding into town with the branches and the processional, and the next year, commemorate his suffering and death (or even try to incorporate both on the same Sunday). Behind this is the knowledge that many

parishioners will not attend Maundy Thursday or Good Friday services, and so, the thinking goes, they will miss the crucifixion entirely. They may hear only the victorious shouts of branch-wavers, and then the next week, the resurrection. If you ask me (and no one did!), it is merely poor preaching which omits the cross of Jesus Christ. It does not require an edict from church authorities to remember that the cross happens between the palm branches and the empty tomb, just preaching that is true to the gospel.

That is why I am glad to preach from this text. Because Jesus goes from the affirmation of the crowd and his entry into on a little donkey- which fulfills Old Testament prophecy, to words about dying and servanthood; losing your life, and his soul being troubled, and even speaking ahead of time the kind of death he would die. This isn't all sweetness and light, is it?

John has an interesting "take" on the crucifixion that seems to answer our quandary over Passion Sunday vs. Palm Sunday. For those of us who want to emphasize the happiness of the day, we can think how the crowd must be able to recognize Jesus' glory as they shout out their hosannas, and about how Jesus says the hour of his glorification has come, and the voice from heaven that says it will glorify his name. Glory. It looks like victory for Jesus. But then we come to

understand that in John, the glorification of Jesus takes place on the cross; that is where he is lifted up or exalted, verses 32-33. And in verses 27-28, Jesus prays that the Father will glorify his own name, and in John God is glorified by the obedience of Jesus. In his very hour of glorification, Jesus compares himself to a grain of wheat that falls into the earth and dies, and compares loving your life and losing it, to hating your life so that you may protect it.

How do we make that comparison; how do we know what our lives are worth? Does life find value in possessions, to the extent even that a person can feel justified to take from another by force or guile? Is life made more valuable by the approval of others; does the adoration of our pets or the enjoyment of our things or even the pleasure taken in the company of friends make our lives more valuable? Does a full life, and its memories recalled, give added worth to our lives? Are we more valuable if we own the nicer car and the bigger house? We may think that we have no worth until we possess a piece of land, “the only thing that lasts,” (as Scarlett O’Hara’s father told her), for it is out of the earth that all the value of the world comes- the natural resources, oil and iron and water, and diamonds and silver and turquoise; the trees to make our furniture and the grass to feed the cattle for slaughter, and the grain for our daily bread. Land is where we

build our homes and offices and rental properties. So the more land, the more our value? That is what's in the minds of the revolutionaries during Jesus' time, and at the center of the troubles in the Holy Land today- who owns the land? But do the people who live under the bridges in cardboard boxes, or in their cars in the alleyways, have no value just because they do not own property? The only plot of land that matters, in the end, is that little one, that is measured in feet. That is where we can quantify the value of our lives. For our worth is not found in things or property, or even happiness or accomplishments or friendships, but the fruit that grows where we are planted. That is where God is glorified. The value of our life is to value someone else's life.

I can't help but think of that woman who died a couple of years ago, a cleaning woman, if I remember, who saved every penny of her long working life, and then left it to the college she was never able to attend. Something like \$2 million for scholarships. She grew such large and tasty fruit with her life. The value of her life was not found in satisfying her desires, but rather, the value she placed upon other people.

And isn't this the meaning of Jesus' words in our scripture, "whoever loves his life, loses it, and whoever hates his life will keep it"? It is a matter of

understanding that our lives are so closely connected, and that clinging to things- possessions, pride, selfish attitudes, only alienates us from others; but sharing ourselves, and serving and following Jesus, brings forth much fruit; and our lives, and the lives of others, are kept safe and made whole.

We can't truly possess anything, at best it's all on rental. Things get broken or stolen or foreclosed on. Friends move or lose interest or pass away. The voices of acclaim one day become the voices of accusation and hatred later in the week. Memories fade. So that all we are left with are the things we give or share. These are the fruits of verse 26- that others may benefit from; this is the life that we do not lose. It cannot be taken away because it is given away. It cannot be destroyed because it is God's life. It cannot be lost because it is shared by many, and their selflessness protects it. Our lives are tied to the lives of others.

And our lives are tied to the life of Jesus. Aren't we here today because we want to know him and serve him better? We may see him as the miracle worker who can feed 5,000, who can make a blind man see and a cripple man walk, who can even call a dead man from the grave. And so, we may join the crowd in waving our happy branches and calling him King. But are we able to recognize

him when he is nailed to the cross, even with that sign over his head “This is the King of the Jews”? That is a different kind of glory- one that cannot be taken away or lost, for he did not try to cling to it; it is a glory that glorified God, and a glory that he shares with all who follow him. He has been lifted up, and from the cross, is drawing us to himself, verse 32, and to the kind of life he lived. A life of serving and giving and bearing fruit. And so, let the value of Jesus’ life create worth in our lives.

And let us worship and love this famous Lord who comes riding into town on the donkey, an inspiration to us all; and let us serve and adore the crucified Lord on the cross who surrenders his life for us, and who calls to us from that high place of humiliation to be his own.