

## **Luke 23:1-49 – The Passion of Our Lord**

I once had someone come up to me after a Palm Sunday service and tell me how much fun they had with the Palm procession, the waving of the branches, and the acting out of the Passion story with members of the congregation getting up and playing parts. They even liked the part of the congregation yelling out in unison, “Crucify Him!”, just like we did. “It was exciting,” they said. “It was different. It was fun.”

Now, I understood where they were coming from. I knew that their intent was to deliver a compliment on a special worship experience. I have to admit, though, that I left the sanctuary that morning thinking, “Oh darn! We blew it. We did it wrong.”

You see, while our worship should be appropriately joyful, the reality is that each time we come together in worship there is the risk of over softening the message and/or intentionally weakening our purpose for gathering. Palm Sunday and Holy week is a time when we should be extra careful not to do that. Palm Sunday is not just another parade day or skit performance.

Palm Sunday is bigger than that. It is the first day of Holy Week and, although it is part of Lent, Holy Week is almost like a season onto itself with one primary purpose. Holy Week is our final push to the cross, not simply the Sunday before Easter. Neither Lent, nor Holy Week, is designed to take us to Easter Sunday. They are cross focused.

Holy Week, as the conclusion of Lent, takes us to the death of Jesus; beaten, ridiculed, and nailed to a cross. Yes, it does start in an uplifting way...Hosanna in the Highest!! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! But it changes quickly and it ends with a stripped altar on Thursday night and a bloodied Savior on Friday. That is what it is supposed to do. It begins in joy but it ends with the question, “What in the world happened?” It begins with certitude with a king and ends in confusion with a corpse. It begins with love and public devotion but ends in fear and hiding in a secluded upper room. It is our week to pay attention and understand what happened.

So what happened? Now, by that I don’t mean to ask what took place during Holy Week. I think most of us can describe the events...the Triumphal ride into Jerusalem on a donkey with palm branches in the air and on the road, the cleansing of the temple that had become a den of robbers, Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane where His will was subjected to God’s plan one final time, the arrest, the trial, the beating, Barabbas set free, the march to the hill outside the city, Simon helping with the cross. We know the Holy Week story. We have heard it since

childhood. So, I guess what I mean to ask is “Why?”. Why did it happen. In our heartbreak it is a question we need to ask: “What changed ‘Hosanna in the Highest!’ to ‘Crucify Him!’?” How did “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord” become “I wash my hands of this matter?” There is actually a Jewish teaching, an understanding from the Mishna, that might help us with that question.

Do you know what happened in the year 70AD? That’s right. The second Temple was destroyed. In 66AD Israel rose up against Rome and in the year 70AD Titus came with his Legion and destroyed most of the city, including the Temple, and took the spoils back to Rome where they were used to build the Coliseum. That is what history teaches us. That is the “what.” But Jewish tradition has a different way of looking at it. They not only give us the what, but they also suggest to us the why. In Jewish tradition, although Rome did the actual deed, the cause of the destruction was *Sinas Chinam*. The Mishna teaches that *Sinas Chinam* rose up within all of Israel and set things in motion that would eventually lead to the downfall of the city and the Temple and Temple form of worship. In essence, it brought the end to the Jewish nation.

And you could also make the case that the growing spirit of *Sinas Chinam*, the curse of *Sinas Chinam*, is what led to the anger seen in the outer courtyard as people gathered to shout, “Crucify Him!” at the top of their lungs. You could also make a strong case that *Sinas Chinam* is active even today, threatening our nation, maybe even the world.

So, what is this *Sinas Chinam*? What is this thing that causes people to act in ways that leads to destruction? What is it that allows people to be led to act out in such anger against their own well-being and even the well-being of all of humanity? Well, the Hebrew expression, *Sinas Chinam* translates into “Gratuitous Hatred.” Gratuitous Hatred. It is hatred for no reason. It is the hatred of each other; our neighbors, those we work with, the neighborhood baker, the teacher at the local school, supporters of a different sports team, the driver in front of us on the highway, the bagboy at the grocery store, people with different pigmentation or those with differing opinions; people we have never met and know nothing about, but hate because it is what we do. It is simply who we have become. It is simply who we have been led to become.

Gratuitous Hatred. It is the plague of fallen humanity. We hate because that is what we do and, if we can’t come up with an explanation, then we just hate louder. That is how we were raised and it has become part of a sinful humanity. We have been taught division from birth, so much so that it is actually easier for us to hate and blame and attack and call people belittling names in order to further divide. And most people don’t even know any better any more. It is just the way of life. It has become automatic and thus, often, unrecognizable. It makes me wonder whether that is what Jesus was talking about when he said, as he headed towards the cross, “Don’t cry for me. Cry for your children and your children’s children.” Gratuitous Hatred, a vicious cycle that leads to destruction.

*Sinas Chinam*; the condition of humanity that made the events of Holy Week necessary. Gratuitous Hatred (the separation, the division, the hatred of each other for no reason), caused by

our willful separation from God, within which we lead ourselves, or will allow ourselves to be led by others, to our destruction; or so it would be if it were not for the intervention by God through the events and actions that we will remember this coming week.

Your see, there is another Hebrew term that defines Holy Week, I think even better. It is a gift from God that takes us beyond our condition, if we will let it. The expression is *Sinas Ahab*... Gratuitous Love. Love, for no reason. Love, unearned and un-earnable. It is God's gift that, when embraced, defeats the condition, cures the illness that plagues humanity.

*Sinas Ahab*, Gratuitous Love. It sees all people as beloved children of God, some lost and struggling, some found and grateful, but all children of God none-the-less. Love for no reason. *Sinas Ahab*. It teaches us from our birth, from our re-birth, that it is actually easier to love instead of hate, understand instead of blame, and embrace instead of attack.

It is how we were made and what we were made for and, although it also becomes automatic and thus unrecognizable to us in our lives, gratuitous love is never un-noticed by others, and neither is what it points to, or who it points to. Instead of a vicious cycle that leads to destruction, *Sinas Ahab* is an ever present uplifting cycle that leads to God and to the fullness of life. It is what Holy Week and the cross are all about. It is both the what and the why of salvation.

*Sinas Ahab*, Gratuitous Love, Love for no reason, undeserved, unearned love that leads to all joy and redemption for all people. Gratuitous love, or, as God calls it in His church...Grace.

*Sinas Ahab* defeats and negates *Sinas Chinam*. I invite you to come this week and watch it happen.

Amen.