

Palm Sunday
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
28 March 2021

Mark 13:1-15:47

Human affection changes frequently, people's loyalties are never constant. You are a hero one day, only to become the villain the next. This is the message that much of the entertainment saturated culture we live in teaches us. And this is no truer than in the world of entertainment itself. Affection is transitory. One moment you are at the top of the charts, hit after hit, adored by millions, the center of attention, and then, just as suddenly, no one seems to know who you are. People move on to the next act, the next entertainment, the next new star.

Love has become temporary too. Just read the statistics on marriage to verify this truth. It is believed that one out of every two marriages end in divorce in America, and that many of those couples who remain married, settle for a form of loveless marriages that respond more to their needs for security, sameness, and tradition than it does to affection needs. Yet, no one thinks of divorce on the wedding night. At first, love is new, passionate, life-giving. There is nothing we will not do for our beloved. No sacrifice is too great to show our love and affection to the one we love. Yet, for some, there is a progressive distancing that happens over time. A distancing that is subtle at first, but over time gains force, to the point that one day you look at your spouse and you wonder why you are still married and what keeps you in the relationship.

Relationships are also transitory. How many of you remain in contact with childhood friends? Can you name five of your high school friends? How many of the friends you made when you were 20 remain your friends today? The truth is that friends are mostly situational and geographically based. When you work at a company, you make friends, which you soon forget when you move to a different company or out of state. Humans create community wherever they are, but we often don't remain emotionally attached to this community once we move on and settle someplace else. Friends come and friends go, and life moves on.

Today, I feel like a public defender, taking on the cause of the crowds in Jerusalem. They welcome Jesus as the "King of the Jews." They chant "Hosanna!" They all want a glimpse of him. Some are just curious about the great Jesus: Miracle worker, star debater, magnificent storyteller, wisdom teacher, and enigmatic Rabbi. He is radical and a much different teacher than the teachers of the Law. He is everything the teachers of the day are not, and people are mesmerized by him. Some just want to be entertained, and why not? Life in first century Palestine is brutal. The Romans press for taxes, the Pharisees and teachers of the law demand religious purity, families live in great poverty and find it hard to provide for their families, there is great lawlessness in country roads

and highways, and most people are afraid to travel outside of a five-mile radius. Why not get a moment of entertainment from this Jesus? Some others watch Jesus with great interest. They wonder is this could be the man who is to liberate Israel from political repression. Could this be the one Jeremiah and Ezekiel spoke about? Could this be the root of Jesse Isaiah announced would come to liberate the nation, the one whose kingdom would never end? Could this be another great leader like Judas or Simon Maccabee? Could this man be the one to mount a glorious insurrection that would drive the Romans out for good? The crowds seem to think he is. They feel that with the right incentive this Jesus could be the spark that ignites the great fire of revolt. This one was one to watch.

We could go on and describe the internal mood or thoughts of each of the people in the crowd that day, but you know what I am trying to say. They all had expectations for this Jesus. Expectations that ranged from a few minutes of entertainment to a prolonged political campaign against the Romans. What is important to note is that all this excitement of Sunday morning will turn to hatred, disappointment, or simply apathy by Friday. Just a few days and their affection will grow cold, for some it will turn to pure hatred, and most of them will thirst for another type of entertainment, that of the spectacle and festive atmosphere of a Roman crucifixion. Those who wanted a sign and a miracle now want a good show, like the great coliseum games in Rome, where many accused were dragged through the arena before death. They wanted the theater of the macabre. When in Jerusalem, might as well do what they do in Jerusalem. The city that kills God's prophets. The city where God's own people had shown the greatest betrayals against their God and where most of the prophets announced a time of darkness and grave judgement.

Every Holy Week, I silently criticize the crowds for their changing affections. Every Holy Week I wonder what would have happened if the crowds had simply refused to be incited to violence by the religious authorities of the day. How would the story be different? Would Jesus have survived the snare of the teachers of the law and Pharisees? Would Jesus have gone on to minister for a few more years? Would Pilate have risked killing Jesus without the crowd's support? The truth is that we will never know. The crowds did turn against Jesus. They did support a corrupt system and an inept Roman official. But perhaps we are more like the crowds than we want to think.

Perhaps we too are complicit in this murder. Perhaps our own fickle affections also turn away from Jesus from time to time. We too deny knowing him when in the presence people we want to impress who think of Jesus as a charlatan. Perhaps we too keep silent when his name is maligned, and his message ridiculed. Perhaps we too watch from a distance when he is insulted, mocked, spat upon, and discarded. Perhaps we too want the type of genteel religion that chooses to betray our Messiah rather than risk offending the sensibilities of our secular friends. Perhaps we too are like the crowds when we see Jesus dying and suffering throughout the world even today. Every time a child dies of malnutrition, Christ dies all over again. Every time a corrupt system kills

thousands of their own people, as in the case of the latest genocides in Myanmar, or the violence in the Middle East, and other places, Jesus dies all over again. Every time a shooter enters a building and kills dozens of fellow citizens, Jesus dies all over again. We know Jesus lives on earth as he lives in heaven and we know he dwells in the hearts of men and women around the globe who suffer for his name and who die in his name every day. Perhaps our silence kills just as deeply as the crowd's shouts to "Crucify him!"

Today we begin a journey to the cross and, yes, we must anticipate resurrection on Easter Sunday. This is our Christian hope, this is the very center of our faith. We must expect life and vindication, but first we must confront our capricious affections and our malaise. Now, let me clarify that I remind us of our complacency and apathy not to create guilt and shame unnecessarily, but rather, to rekindle our affection to Jesus of Nazareth, to draw us closer to him, to inspire us to die with him, to suffer with him, to wait with him in the garden, and to be lifted with him on the cross. We must confront our capricious and ever-changing affections and we must rekindle our love for Jesus and our gratitude for his great sacrifice on the cross.

I invite you, brothers and sisters, to join our Messiah on his journey this week and to confront our own lives, so that we may once again fall in love with him who died a gruesome death for our liberation. May he continue to bless you, Amen!