

"IT IS FINISHED."

From the sermon series "The Seven Last Words of Christ"

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This is the sixth sermon in a series on the Seven Last Words of Jesus Christ from the Cross. The seventh will shape the meditation for our service this Thursday night at 7:30pm. I hope you will be there.

Palm Sunday is a day that means different things to different people. For many of us it is one of the most joyful days to be with children in church; for others it is a deadly serious story the first step on Jesus' faithful road to the Cross. In the past few days we've witnessed in our own modern world new acts of violence in Stockholm, and just this morning a new attack on a church in Egypt; we've seen the continuation of atrocities in Syria; and yet today we awaken in Cincinnati to one of the most beautiful Palm Sunday mornings one can imagine, a day full of promise and joy. Still, right here in our own city, today many people will struggle. What are we to make of it all? So today I'm going to talk about the various meanings of Palm Sunday and of Jesus' road to the Cross in the week to come, and what Jesus might have meant when, at the end of his journey, he says the Cross, "It is finished."

Let us pray:

Gracious God, in the midst of a troubled world, and in a life which often puzzles us with its blessings and its troubles, startle us with your truth and open us to your love. Open our hearts to your word to us, and may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, for you O Lord are our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Outside of Pisa, Italy, the Virgo Interferometer is beginning its work, it is now the third machine of its kind in the world, a gigantic gravitational wave detector—a pair of tunnels in the shape of an L, each one several kilometers long, equipped with sensors that detect deviations in gravitational movement down to the size of a single photon.

A gravitational wave detector. If you're like me, you thought the whole gravity thing was figured out a long time ago. You drop something from your hand and it lands on

the floor, and that's how you prove that gravity exists. But Einstein argued long ago that there are major gravitational events going on out there in the universe, events that make cosmic waves, and he knew that one day we would have the capability to detect those waves, and that day is now upon us. With this new technology, scientists expect to detect the collision of black holes, galaxies far away from us—these are the real gravitational events.

I read a three-page article about this in *Scientific American* (April 1, 2017) and at the end of it, I still had no idea why this is important. Let me be clear: I don't doubt that it is important—I'm not saying I was suspicious of it—I just didn't understand the importance, and the article's authors just never spelled it out; apparently most of their readership doesn't need that. So I called a fraternity brother of mine who has a PhD in physical chemistry (it was a really cool fraternity, I promise). Eric said that these gravitational wave detectors deal with big questions about the nature of the universe: how did we get here, what kinds of cosmic events might create life, and what's out there beyond what we can see even with the most powerful telescope. It occurred to me, ironically, that academic publications in theology work in much the same way. Plenty of theological studies originate with big questions about the source and meaning of life—but no one would bother to spell them out in the article. If you're reading the theology magazine, it's assumed that you get the connection. Depending on your knowledge and background, we all have very different ways of interpreting information.

Differences in background and experience and priorities account for some very different interpretations of Palm Sunday. In the church, we have a tradition of handing our children a palm leaf and we enjoy how beautiful they are as they walk up the aisle of the church reenacting the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. Parents and children look forward to this, and we all hope this is one way that children fall in love with the life of the church. In these symbolic, visible acts of faith in which children are invited to become active participants in our worship, we hope faith will become a part of their life. Many of you who have gone to church since childhood may remember few specifics from your Sunday School days, but you probably remember carrying a branch on Palm Sunday.

For biblical scholars, the story of Palm Sunday is different from that joyful parade; this is a deeply serious day. Here's how they might tell the story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem: In a biting ironic act of theatrical, political provocation, Jesus of Nazareth sends his disciples, not for a battle-proven warhorse and a chariot, but for a borrowed donkey, and on its back he makes his famous entry into Jerusalem, mocking the military parades of the Roman Empire and the like, insisting that true leadership has nothing to do with the carnage and ego of the ancient military-industrial complex, nor does leadership manifest itself in brutal acts of terror from one religious or ethnic group toward another; but real leadership is about service, humility, and peace. This idea may seem naïve, it is certainly radical; It is one of Jesus' many acts that is offensive

enough in Jesus' day that a week after his ride on that donkey, Jesus will be hanged. This is what Palm Sunday is *really* about, the scholars say. So some biblical scholars then comment derisively on the traditions of the church that they find to be an unfortunately cute domestication of the real story.

Preachers walk the line between the scholarship we read about the grim history of this day and the beautiful celebration it has become in the life of the church. We know the revolutionary story behind the day, and we also know the importance of welcoming and nurturing our children.

Which is the correct interpretation? The answer here is not that one or the other of these perspectives is the right one; both of them are important. We have to figure out ways to celebrate the love and joy of Jesus Christ with our children; we must teach them that God loves them and the church is their home. And with people who are more mature in their faith, it is essential to talk about the gravity of this day and the week that is before us, if we are to take seriously the meaning of Jesus.

We all have to decide what the meaning of Jesus' death is going to be for us, and this comes to a head in one of the last things that Jesus says on the Cross, one of his traditional Seven Last Words.

At the end, Jesus says, "It is finished."

When I consider the various ways the Palm Sunday story gets interpreted, what I conclude about Jesus' words, "It is finished," is this: Jesus has done what he came to do. It is now the responsibility of us who know the story to decide what his life and death means and to put it into practice.

When you read the Bible, who do you think Jesus was? Was he a revolutionary? Or a peacemaker? Or something in between? Did he mean the unbelievable things he said: about the soulless pursuit of wealth, about the moral stain of prejudice, about the miracle of grace? Who do you think Jesus was? Who do you think Jesus *is*?

The answers to these questions, when they are asked seriously, lead to wildly different conclusions for individual people and for the church. I've worshipped in grand cathedrals and in corrugated iron lean-tos, and everything in between. I've seen churches whose top priority is how many people can we get through the door, and I've seen churches that remain very small because they take the demands of discipleship very seriously—and everything in between. I've seen churches that believe everything in the Christian faith amounts to action on the social gospel of Jesus Christ, and churches that just wish for Jesus to give them one hour of peace and comfort—and everything in between.

Mature people have to look closely at the story of Jesus and ask what it means. We do

this with all kinds of stories.

Yevgeny Yevtushenko died a week ago. He was a Russian poet who gained notoriety as a voice protesting the age of Stalin, and forbidding the return of such tyranny. His ability to navigate the fine line between protest and celebrity made him famous. I bring this up because Yevtushenko is a man who is understood in many different ways. To some, he is a revolutionary; to others, a sellout; and to yet others, a representative of how you bridge the gap between those extremes. Yevtushenko spent the last years of his life in the classroom as a professor at the University of Tulsa. Perhaps realizing we can only control so much about our reputations, he took on this work that did not add to his own legacy but would encourage those who would come next. He "enjoyed watching younger generations coming into their own." One recent student remembered a class during which he stated in dramatic tones, "Someone is near...I feel it. Someone always has to be the leader of a generation. Someone has to be born. Why not one of you?" (New York Times, April 2, 2017).

Jesus makes a similar statement when he says on the Cross, "It is finished."

All of us need to determine who Jesus is for us, how we will respond to his life, to the message of Palm Sunday and the week to come. For our children, I believe it needs to continue to be a fun and celebratory day that values their participation in the church. For the rest of us, there is now a week before us, one final week of Jesus' road to the Cross during which each of us must decide how seriously we will take this story-- and if it will have any impact on our lives.

Amen.