POLITICS AND PIETY

--a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
University Lutheran Church
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"Say to the daughter of Zion: Look, your king comes to you; he is humble, he rides on a donkey."(Matthew 21:5a, New Jerusalem Bible)

The Whitney Museum in New York is now showing a large collection of works by the contemporary American painter, Andrew Wyeth. The show is packing people in, as it did earlier in Baltimore and Philadelphia. Which is interesting. Wyeth, as you know, is a representational painter. He sketches recognizable people and places, a young boy wearing a Daniel Boone cap, sitting in an open field by himself, or farm buildings nestling together in the midst of a snow storm. Wyeth's world is surely not a world of perfection, but it is a world of silence and tranquility.

Contrast this to the world in which we live, and we can understand at least some of Wyeth's popularity. Most of us are immersed in noise and turmoil. From traffic jams, cocktail party chatter, and late shows, to troop build-ups, kill ratios, and credibility gaps. So we naturally yearn for peace and quiet, for the kind of world which Wyeth paints.

I surmise that people sometimes turn to religion for similar reasons. We hunger for peace of mind, peace in our community, peace between nations. So, from Sunday to Sunday we pray that God should continue his blessings to us as a people, "that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life." We have been taught to seek God's still, small voice in a sanctuary surrounded by stained glass windows. Likewise, we have been taught to picture our Lord as the Good Shepherd, walking amidst the quiet hills of the Holy Land with a lamb on his shoulders. Peace we want. Peace we seek.

It comes as something of a surprise, then, to see our Lord, the man of peace, riding directly into the noise and turmoil of the city. For awhile, it is true, Jesus did try to hide himself from public view. For awhile, he made no open sorties into the mainstream of civic and national life. But there did come a time when he reversed all this, when in full view he entered into Jerusalem. And this was a living parable. It brought to fulfilment a long history of biblical experience with public life.

The history of Israel began with a revolt against the tyranny of Egyptian overlords, and with the goal of establishing a new nation in freedom. Many wars and many political compromises followed, not the least of which was the introduction of a monarchical form of government. When that government began to decay, the prophets arose in the center of civic life and called for justice and righteousness. Later, when Israel was defeated thoroughly and carried off to exile in Babylon, the nation struggled to keep its political identity, and looked forward to a day of deliverance. This deliverance it then saw coming in the person of Cyrus of Persia, who was to defeat the Babylonian captors. Closer to the time of Jesus, when the successors of Alexander the Great ruled Palestine, the Jews rose up under Judas Maccabeus in a

-2-

heroic, but finally futile rebellion. So the history of Israel was an intensely political history. We might even say that for Israel, politics was what was real. Everything else was peripheral.

Politics was what was real. I imagine that not too many of us feel easy with such an assertion. Perhaps, for awhile, we did: when we had a young man in the White House, not altogether unlike Judas Maccabeus. But then the great hope for a New Frontier was shot down. And we were back to business as usual, or so it seemed. Our politics became what it had perhaps been for some time, a rather futile affair.

Listen to poet Richard Lattimore as he tells about a visit he made to a planet called earth. Heroes here, he says, who are genuine

> heroes, are also killers. These people can do anything difficult, but nothing easy: catch and tame sight and sound out of space; stroll in it; fly tons of steel and come down on a handkerchief, yet cannot realize a simple covenant. Hundreds of wise men are united by subtle communication, to form one mind and talk like a single idiot.

If we feel that our heroes are killers, and if we feel that our technology is an idiot, how can we possibly say that public life is where reality is?

Viet Nam is perhaps the case in point. On the one hand, it is such a complex, frustrating problem. Who knows what the facts are and what the policy alternatives really are? On the other hand, we hear so much about it. It is on the front page of every newspaper. Virtually every magazine we read has long stories or articles on Viet Nam. And Viet Nam gets into just about every sermon, on one way or another. Hence we feel like saying: for goodness sake, isn't there something else we can talk about? We have heard so much that we can hardly hear anymore.

As a result of such complexity and saturation, we tend to tune out on politics altogether. We become political drop-outs, more or less. As one contemporary has expressed it, "the only thing for nonenslaved man to do is to move out to the edge, lose contact with the machines of organization which are as ubiquitous in this country as in Russia." (Karl Shapiro) There are many ways of doing this, of course. From exclusive concentration on one's own needs and goals, to escape into the peace and quiet of the New England countryside.

But we cannot be political drop-outs and still claim that we are making sense out of the biblical writings. In particular, we cannot be political drop-outs and claim that we are disciples of the One we call Christ. Let me put this very strongly. Let me pull our text out of its context and modernize it: <u>this Palm Sunday Jesus rides into Saigon or Hanoi</u>. I mean to say that the biblical experience of God drives Israel, and finally Jesus himself, into the very center of politcal life. That's where the reality is, however frustrating and exhausting and tormenting it may be.

It is impossible for any genuine christian to remain forever detached from politics, that is, open participation in the totality of community life. Sooner or later our secret piety -- if it is authentic -- has to burst through its shells and make us take a public

stance. "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."(Mt. 5:16) From a biblical perspective, piety without politics is dead. It is like a lamp under a bushel.

But not just any politics. And this is the most difficult point of all. Jesus does not ride into Jerusalem on a chariot, he rides into Jerusalem on a donkey. His politics are not the politics of self-affirmation, but the politics of reconciliation. "Say to the daughter of Zion: Look, your king comes to you; he is humble, he rides on a donkey." Jesus enters Jerusalem in the name of political peace, not political aggrandizement. In a word, he doesn't seek his own honor.

Which sets Jesus apart. First, from much of the history of Israel, in which a good deal of the political involvement was mixed up with the spirit of nationalism. Secondly, from us. I wonder how we can pray, as we do when we use some of the collects in our red hymnal that our leaders should "uphold the honor of our nation." As Christians we are not interested in our honor, if we are true to our faith. We are interested in reconciliation between man and man, between God and man. And that means sacrificing our own honor, perhaps even our own lives, going the extra mile to achieve true human community.

So, politics is where reality is; and like Jesus when the time is right you and I are prepared to take a public stance there. But again like Jesus: not for our own sakes, but for the sake of reconciliation, even if it costs us dearly.

You are probably wondering whether I am suggesting that we must all be pacifists. I am not. Surely pacifism is not excluded, but it is by no means the self-evident alternative. Recall that Jesus himself used force to cleanse the temple in Jerusalem. The Gospel of John even pictures him with a whip. The overriding point, I think, is not the issue of pacifism but this: that we ought to be willing to take a public stance for peace and be willing to pay the consequences of that stance, even up to death itself. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs in the kingdom of heaven."(Mt.5:9f.)

Yet how could Jesus do it? How could he bring himself to ride the donkey and not the chariot? That is the amazing part of it all: that he did do it, and that he did not waver, even at the end. At least all this is amazing to me, since I myself am much more inclined to keep myself crouched down in the foxhole than to stand up and face the crossfire. And I suspect that at least a few of you are foxhole crouchers, too. More generally, we can understand the force of Stalin's classical question to a diplomat who counseled him about not offending the pope. Stalin asked, how many divisions does the pope have? Like Stalin, we like to rely on sure political brute force, and we do not have it at our disposal we are not inclined to venture forth.

Jesus did not have any divisions. That's the astounding part of it. How could he do it without wavering? He stands apart from the history of Israel, and from our history. The answer is not easy, but it is relatively simple. Jesus could enter Jerusalem publicly, move toward

-4-

an almost certain death, because he trusted in God. He trusted in God to empower him with the Spirit. He trusted in God to hear his prayers. He trusted in God to triumph finally over all the unholy noise and turmoil of Jerusalem. He was pious in the best sense of that word.

We celebrate that piety this day. We parade around and we say to ourselves, -- thank God, he did it. He showed us the way and the power of suffering love. He was and is the embodiment of that love. As the Apostle says in our Epistle lesson, "though he was in the form of God, [he] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant."(Phil. 2:6f.) We know that we cannot follow his way very easily. Thank God, he did it. Thank God, he was who he was.

Still, with the gift of God's Spirit, we can be pious in that sense, too. We can enter into the power of Jesus' own trust in God. We can pray in his name. We can identify ourselves with him and his self-giving life. We can have this mind among ourselves, as the Apostle suggests.(Phil. 2:5) The power of Christ can grow in us and shape our lives into conformity with his.

To enter into Jerusalem, -- that is where the reality is. To enter into Jesus' trust in God, -- that is where the power is. Politics and piety. That is the challenge of Palm Sunday.

"Say to the daughter of Zion: Look, your king comes to you; he is humble, he rides on a donkey."