

Malcolm Clemens Young
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA X12
Palm Sunday (Year A) 11:00 a.m. Palm Procession & Eucharist
Sunday 9 April 2017 With Passion Narrative Mt. 27:11-54

Isaiah 50:4- 9a
Ps. 118, Ps. 31:9-16
Philippians 2:5-11
Matthew 21:1-11

Humility Bridge

“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...” (Phil. 2).

We all need a kind of homing instinct, an intuition to remind us where we come from and how to return. The Bar-Tailed Godwit is a bird known for flying nonstop across the Pacific Ocean. It nests in Alaska and then flies to Australia or New Zealand. Creatures like Sandhill Cranes, Monarch butterflies and honeybees can navigate by the sun and stars, and even recognize landmarks.

Perhaps to compensate for not having the enigmatic abilities of wild geese or gray whales human beings have our own mysterious gift in the maps we make.¹ We orient ourselves in time and space and meaning through stories. In all of history no story has done more to help human beings understand their situation than the last days of Jesus. The actions and words of Jesus show us the reality of our own situation. They remind us of where we are, who we are and to whom we belong.

Herman Melville dedicates an entire chapter of his novel *Moby Dick* to the inconspicuous rope that lies in the bottom of the whaling longboat. It is attached to the harpoon and waiting to be deployed. He describes its width, length, strength, how it is manufactured and the strategies for its use.

Finally he writes about its danger, “the whale-line folds the whole boat in its complicated coils, twisting and writhing around it in almost every direction. All the oarsmen are involved in its perilous contortions... when the line is darting out, to be seated in the boat” is like being inside a steam engine almost caught and pummeled by its massive gears and pistons – only the boat is also rocking wildly and unpredictably.

Melville writes, “All [people] are enveloped in whale-lines. All are born with halters round their necks; but it is only when caught in the swift, sudden turn of death, that mortals realize the silent, subtle, ever-present perils of life.”²

We have had hundreds of people here for seventeen funerals this year. What has struck me in talking to these visitors is that death seems like such a tremendous surprise to them. They cannot see the rope coiled at the bottom of their lives. Because most of them are not people of faith, the best that they can offer to others and themselves is something like, “we’ll have great memories of this friend that we loved so much.” They say, “no one will ever forget that time in Paris,” when we all know that we will.

This feels especially tragic to me. These friends feel no sense of larger purpose, no real meaning in their actions. For them there is no eternal life, no possibility of reconciliation, nothing holy. For them there is nothing to pray to. The universe just feels like an empty room too large for us even to hear an echo.

Our life in Christ offers so much more. Jesus shows us a new way of coming close to God. He introduces us to a new form of relation with each other. To the church at Ephesus the Apostle Paul writes, “remember that you were... without Christ... having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near....” (Eph. 2:11-12).

To the church at Philippi Paul explains that we have a new purpose – to be fully transformed into God’s children. He writes, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself... he humbled himself and became obedient even to the point of death” (Phil. 2).

The Greek word *kenosis* means to empty one’s self out. We need to let go of our ego’s unrelenting and outrageous demands in order to make a place for God. This transformation begins with humility.

Karl Barth (1886-1968) the most prominent theologian of the twentieth century writes that in this “self-emptying” and “self-humbling,” “Christ is Christ and God is God. In it alone can Christians be Christians.” We do not become Christians by knowing something that others do not know but by putting other people first.³

This morning we stand with the crowds who welcome Jesus to Jerusalem. Later we will witness the horrifying story of his humiliation and death. We do this not just as spectators, but to choose a humbler path so that our lives will be transformed. This story is how we find our way home to God. It has important implications for the world now.

Last week I spoke with the Berkeley sociologist Arlie Hochschild about the profound political divisions in our country. According to a Pew study, in contrast to previous times, the most politically engaged Americans see the “other party” not just as wrong, but as, “so misguided that they threaten the nation’s well-being.” She talked about an empathy wall which she defines as, “an obstacle to deep understanding of another person, one that can make us feel indifferent or even hostile to those who hold different beliefs,” or grew up in a different setting.⁴

As she outlined the qualities that define this division (Republican/Democrat, Fox News/CNN, Northern-Coastal/Southern-Central, etc.), I realized that as Christians in Northern California we stand with one foot on each side of the wall. We have a special responsibility as a kind of bridge for healing division.

But this means that we need to become clearer on what makes our faith different from a secular agenda. This week I had the chance to talk to fellow clergy about this question. The importance of humility for Christians lies at the heart of their response. The world looks very different to people who believe in Jesus’ teaching about the Kingdom of God.

Let me share the three elements that these clergy believe distinguishes their faith from today’s secular liberalism. First, Phil Ellsworth from St. Stephen’s Belvedere observed that the, “dead aren’t that important in the liberal project.”⁵ Tradition matters greatly to us. G.K. Chesterton writes, “Tradition means giving a vote to the most obscure of all

classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead..." At Grace we try to see a bigger time horizon altogether. We have a sense for the ongoing presence of the saints and this makes it easier for us to imagine the generations to come.⁶

The second thing the clergy said was that in their experience the secular world seems more dedicated to winning arguments or simply "making it so" through force. The clergy think that our churches care more about invitation and relationship. We believe that sin has a hold on us and we are seeking to be transformed by God through the example of Jesus.

The final point my friends mentioned distinguishing us from secular people is that we do not believe that it is up to us to save the world. We have very important responsibilities as God's stewards but God is ultimately the one in charge. This is a very different orientation to the universe. We do not regard the world as something that we have made. For us creation is a gift that we need to care for.

In the face of "the silent, subtle, ever-present perils of life" the story of Jesus shows us our way home. Jesus reminds us through his words and example that God longs to fill each of us with the Holy Spirit. We just need to empty ourselves in humility first. In a world of empathy walls we have the chance to be empathy bridges.

Like the Godwit soaring above the Pacific Ocean we have found a kind of homing instinct, an intuition to remind us where we come from and how to return.

¹ Edward F. Mooney, *Lost Intimacy in American Thought: Recovering Personal Philosophy from Thoreau to Cavell* (NY: Continuum, 2009) 31.

² Herman Melville, *Moby Dick, or The Whale* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979) 284-88.

³ "Any "mind" which is not directed to it, however exalted or penetrating it may be passes by Christ and therefore passes by God, and is therefore an un-christian "mind." Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics Index with Aids for the Preacher* ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (NY: T&T Clark, 1977) 369-70.

⁴ Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (NY: The New Press, 2016) 5-6.

⁵ Phil Ellsworth, Anna Haver, Paul Alleck, etc. Fresher Start, Grace Cathedral, 6 April 2017.

⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, Chapter Four.