

## **Holy Week of the Merciful Cross: Knowing Him More**

On Palm Sunday, Lent becomes Holy Week—the seven days leading to the cross. Perhaps the parallel between Jesus' 40-days in the desert and His commitment to crucifixion is becoming clear.

Jesus sanctified the desert for us. He made a way in our wilderness. Instead of a place of temptation unto despair, He transformed 'the desert of loneliness into a garden of solitude' (Leanne Payne). His reliance upon the Father there grants us grace to encounter Him in the harsh realities of our lives.

Jesus' 40 days in the desert had another purpose--it helped prepare Him for Calvary. Enduring harsh circumstance and demonic temptation was a practice run for His ultimate desert: the bitter cup of abandonment unto death. Just as He made the 'burning sand a pool', so shall He transform the grave into the ground for new life.

As we followed Him into the desert, so shall we follow Him to His death. Our hope lies in mercy: the first fruit of Calvary. We already believe that He died and rose again in order to unite us to the Father's unfailing love. Yet partaking of the benefits of the cross does not exempt us from the crosses He asks us to carry.

This is where we waver. We want to celebrate His new life without suffering. We want His glory, not a glimpse of His wounds yet visible. We want to dance on blood-free ground. Jesus does not give us that option. He calls us to discover our own little crosses in light of His large one. His victory sustains us as He calls us to endure minor abandonments for the Kingdom's sake.

I resist this. As Bonhoeffer says of Christians like me, I claim to love the cross but actually resist it in real life. I want to leap over tribulations like a Pentecostal athlete, not bear them patiently. I may even dare shake my fist at God for inviting me to share in His suffering. In that way, I claim to love the cross but in actuality I hate it. Why else would I so strenuously try to avoid it?

Yet how else can we know Him more? The Apostle Paul said it all. 'I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, and so somehow to attain to the resurrection from the dead.' (Phil. 3: 10, 11)

That verse is key to understanding our participation in Holy Week. Knowing Christ demands we follow Him to Calvary, our little crosses intact. As we bear suffering patiently, He bears with us, and waits with us for the resurrection to come.

We start walking to Calvary on Palm Sunday, Jesus' 'triumphal' entry into Jerusalem on the eve of His passion.

Looking back on this celebratory event, 'triumphal' seems a bit ironic. The very disciples that

cheered Him with palms and Hosannas crucified Him with their silence a few days later. Like me, they embraced the benefits of the cross but refused its claim on their lives.

People love miracles. According to Luke 19:37, they praised Jesus loudly on Palm Sunday 'for all the miracles they had seen.' Jesus brought Heaven down to earth through miracles. He had opened blind eyes, bound up broken hearts, cast out demons, and raised the dead. How apt the adoration of Christ the Healer!

But being touched by Heaven does not a faithful follower make. He who sings loudest and longest may use the same voice to cry out 'Crucify Him!' or at least 'I don't know Him' when the Crucifiers come looking.

Scripture is clear: After the parade, when the heat was on and the political and religious leaders hunted down Jesus' accomplices, 'all the disciples deserted Him and fled.' (Matt. 26:56)

Zeal for the benefits of the cross must be continually tempered by its costliness. The cross invites us to follow Him after the worship and healing conference. It is usually after the 'group effect' that we are confronted by forces inside and outside of us that test our allegiance to Him.

God is faithful to us through such tribulation. He wants us to know Him more through such hardship, not in spite of it. That has been key to my spiritual growth and to the growth of Desert Stream. The merciful joy won for us on the cross can thrive amid the sorrow of facing our crosses squarely.

'As You have shown us mercy, O God, in the desert places of our lives, would You show mercy to the beleaguered state of marriage in the USA? As the Perry vs. Schw. case wends its way to the National Supreme Court, prepare for Yourself a victory. We shall render to Caesar what is Caesar's but we shall prayerfully fight for what is Yours, O God. Prepare the hearts of each justice, especially Justice Anthony Kennedy, to uphold marriage according to Your merciful design. Remember mercy, O God.'