

Palm Sunday, April 13, 2025
St. Michael's Church
The Rev. Joshua Wong

Focus: The power of persuasion.

Function: I am preaching this message to remind my congregation that our faith should be grounded on God's word, not by the persuasive message of our times.

Today's Gospel: Luke 23:1-49

Let us pray:

"Lord of Peace, on this Palm Sunday, as we remember your peaceful entry into Jerusalem, inspire us with your life. Empower us to be instruments of peace, advocating for the marginalized and working towards justice for all of your creation." **Amen.**

"Hosanna! " "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Blessed is the King of Israel!" These were some of the enthusiastic shouts we heard during Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem and we may have even shouted them out just now. The procession of the palms in which Jesus rides on a donkey entering Jerusalem where the multitudes laid their palm branches and clothes on the ground to honor the king of kings, took place only six days before the scene that was just narrated.

Only six days later, after so many people joyously shouted their hope-filled declaration, many stood with the chief priests in persecuting Jesus. What happened? How could these loyalists become his enemies? Yes, not all of his followers shared these beliefs, but they did not speak up maybe because of fear. Biblical scholars say that even among the Pharisees, not all of them were against Jesus. Remember a few weeks ago, it was the Pharisees who warned Jesus to leave because Herod was looking to kill him. Not all Jewish leaders thought Jesus was guilty, not Herod or Pilate. Herod and Pilate made their decisions due to pressure from the loudest voices. Commentary writers Eugene Boring and Fred Craddock say, “The reader should also note that Luke carefully eliminates the Pharisees as the guilty ones. Luke instead presents the chief priests and their associates in the temple as guilty of Jesus’ death.”

What really stood out to me in this passage was how easy it is for us to be persuaded into believing misinformation. We are persuaded by people we think has the truth, these include our political leaders, our spiritual leaders and even celebrities we admire. Those who once proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah might have been persuaded by the louder voices of the chief priests who offered them something that dissuaded them from their allegiance to Christ.

Who are the voices in our lives today? How do we allow them to persuade our fundamental beliefs? Could it be that they offer us status or inclusion into a group we admire? Today, we are reminded to carefully discern information from all sources, so we remain on the side of truth. In Luke's day, Herod was a puppet king who ruled in Galilee at the pleasure of the Romans. And Pilate, was also out for himself, shrewdly deferring to Herod for the final decision. They both did not care about justice, only to hold on to their own political power and their jobs. Finally, Pilate, finding no fault worthy of death bowed to the persuasion of the people. So too, we should be careful what persuades our fundamental beliefs.

Therefore, Jesus always speaks about the condition of our hearts. In Biblical times, the heart represents the seat of life or strength. Hence, Jesus always asks us to reflect on the integrity of our mind, soul, spirit, and our entire emotional nature and understanding.

In the corporate world, the term, "being a loyalist," often refers to someone who prescribes to the corporate ideals no matter what the cost is to them. They are ultimately always looking after themselves in order to advance their careers. They are easily persuaded by the popular vote because they want to fit in even if it means selling their souls. You may have worked with a person like that before. I can imagine there were many people in the mob that were loyalists. They didn't

stand for what Christ was teaching, but they were easily persuaded by the voices of the chief priests and sold Jesus out. When Jesus wasn't safe to be around, or when Jesus was no longer popular they left.

How grounded is our faith? In our day and time, we need to be careful not to be a “loyalist Christians” whose faith is based on popular social beliefs, or even family traditions. **In order to hear the voice of God**, our faith should be grounded in our personal and corporate faith in God. The voice of God may not always be convenient, prestigious, or instagramable, but it will allow us to hear the cries of LGBTQia youths who are homeless, or hear the voices of immigrants who fear deportation. And importantly, the voice of God will help us discern the spiritual mistruths that are being taught in some of our churches.

There is a sure way to know the truth. Matthew 22 says: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Next time you discern wisdom, ask yourself if these two commandments align in your decision.

Retired Bishop Michael Curry speaks about the powerful message of love that can change the world. In a message he delivered to the audience gathered in Callaway Chapel in Georgia, he said, “Love is not sentimental. Love is powerful, selfless, self-sacrificial, and impactful, it must extend beyond those we love to those we dislike and to those we don't even know. Love is the way. It's not only the way, it's the only way. There is no other way that will work for us all.” In order for people to know Jesus, the message of love must shatter all the distracting voices in our society.

Here at St. Michael's we all share in spreading God's message of love to our community. Small but mighty, we are a beacon of light on this corner in El Segundo. During this past year, we are thankful for the connection we have with El Segundo Herald who has kindly included St. Michael's news in their paper. The paper is our voice to spread information about our ministries. It is our powerful voice that reaches thousands of people all over South Bay.

In the Fall, we will have a new opportunity to be another powerful voice to the students at Otis College of Art and Design in Westchester. This internationally acclaimed art institute has many students from around the world who are in need of a safe community. There are also many students in the college that have food insecurity as well, Starting in the Fall, we, along with Holy Nativity will be

offering unlimited free make your own peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Our tag line is “Build sandwiches, build friendships.” This ministry is another example of how St. Michael’s can be a part of the love spreading difference in the world.

However persuasive and powerful the message of the world can be to challenge our alliance with Christ, we need not despair. The Holy Spirit equipped us with the power to spread the truth in the world. We are spiritual influencers where ever we go...among our community, our colleagues, and especially with our own families. We partner with the Holy Spirit to live authentic, honest lives that affect change in the world.

The story of Palm Sunday reminds us to be aware of how easily we can be influenced if we are not grounded in Christ’s truth. When todays information comes to us in lightening speed, and when AI information seems to be unverified, Jesus calls us to be resurrection people who are grounded in truth, in order for us to be people who know, speak and defend the truth. Amen.

Boring and Craddock continue to say, “By Luke’s time, the temple and its leadership had been destroyed in the war with Rome. So, Luke emphasizes the guilt of a segment of Jewish leadership of a past generation, together with a few unscrupulous Roman governors, all of whom knew Jesus was innocent.” But the mobs were fueled by persuasion of lies and pressure.

Although there may be parallels between the scenario we heard enacted today and our current time in history, there is a difference, and that is, we know the result of the Easter story. Love wins. Righteousness wins. God’s **grace** for humanity wins. We know the darkness will be defeated, and after the darkness there will be light. That is the hope we hold onto in our troubled world today. Before there is a new heaven and a new earth, Jesus invites us to participate in living out the voice of truth today.