

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA 22310
Palm Sunday, April 17, 2011

Matthew 27: Selected Verses
Isaiah 50:4–9

HOLDING PALMS AND PASSION TOGETHER

This is the beginning of a difficult week. Hopefully you've seen the subtle transitions in worship and in music today—maybe not so subtle for some of you who have been practicing. We are moving from a bouquet of hosannas to, finally, at the end of the service today, a song of lament. We start worship with all the praise. We end with sacrificial love.

This week, as much as any other in the life of the church, is when we see what God wanted for humanity and we see how quickly we reject God's plan—how we thwart publicly and privately what God intends. And we do so with our own betrayal. This is the week when we either believe we are responsible for the death of Christ or we refuse. And we excuse ourselves—we deflect the pain.

For too long I have witnessed Church school lessons and sermons where Judas is let off the hook. After all, he was just a zealot. He was in many ways a Jewish patriot. For too long we excused nefarious rabbis and friends of Christ who literally turned their backs. I don't believe it's possible to read or experience any of Isaiah's servant songs or any of the gospel accounts of this week and not be awestruck by the strength of Christ and to also feel the remorse of our continued participation at thwarting what God wants to do in our midst. Yes, Jesus began this week (as we said with the children) teaching people who gladly repeated his lessons. His sermons that we know are engaging and instructive. People walk away with a fresh sense of the Holy Spirit. But by the time Friday comes, there is not one worshiper left. They have all gone. No one stands beside him. By the time Friday comes, he is utterly abandoned. When the sun sets on Friday, the tongue which taught so beautifully is silent.

And his lifeless body is placed, sealed in a cold, dark cave.

Do you know someone who has felt utterly abandoned by God? Do you know someone who has felt completely alone in this world? Do you know someone who has felt taken for granted, unappreciated, weary of giving and giving and never being thanked? Do you know someone who's just tired—tired of working harder and harder and never feeling caught up?

Hail King of the Jews! The words become a taunt as the week progresses. The rejoicing of the parade becomes an insult as Friday approaches. All that hope becomes despair. And what frightens me most about this week is not the earth shattering treachery, not the back-stabbing betrayals, not even the frustration of idealism squashed. What terrifies me most is the ordinary "everyday-ness" of our own anger—of our violence, of our

hatred. You know, the common-garden-variety rejection of God's reign in our lives, in our homes, in our offices, in our schools, even in our churches. Yes, for too long Judas has been explained away, but verse 15 says it so clearly, doesn't it? "What will you give me if I betray him?" They paid him 30 pieces of silver.

Now you can use all the historical and informed criticism you want to explain away that verse, but it's really, in the end, just about the money. And isn't that what Jesus preached over and over again?

Our resistance to what God wants can be traced back to our checkbooks and our VISA statements. All the unmistakable engrave such detail about our ultimate loyalty. We are accustomed to be all too comfortable with swords and violence associated with death—especially Jesus' death. But what would genuinely disturb us, if we were to admit it, that all our resistance to God's kingdom is little more than 30 pieces of silver ...

God have mercy on our souls.