

# SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE


MAJESTY IN TRANSIT

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## MAJESTY IN TRANSIT

"Pussy-cat, pussy-cat, where have you been?  
I've been to London to visit the queen.  
Pussy-cat, pussy-cat, what did you there?  
I chased a little mouse under a chair."

What a pity to settle for a mouse when one might have seen the queen!

We may be sure that on that first Palm Sunday many in the crowd undershot their opportunity. Every happening can be experienced on a variety of levels. On that occasion some enjoyed only the excitement and exhilaration of a good parade. Some were fascinated by the possibility of verifying the rumor that Lazarus had been raised from the dead. Others were grateful for the Passover homecoming that would enable them to touch base again with friend and kin. Still others, aware of the tension that prevailed between Jesus and the authority of church and state, thirsted for the showdown that was sure to come since Jesus had gone public with His claim to be the king.

Only a few, less than we are prone to imagine, sensed what was really up -- a city, a culture, a religion, a people, were living out their moment of truth. And the rigor of the test was intensified by the fact that Jesus was in motion. "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord." (John 12:13b) "Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold thy king cometh, sitting on an ass's colt!" (John 12:15) Watch Him as He comes! See Him as He goes! "Majesty in Transit."

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I don't mean only that Jesus was a busy man. He was that to be sure. He crowded an incredible amount of activity into those three short years. And always without a sense of flurry or a sign of panic. Wherever one touches

down in the gospels he becomes aware of motion. "Passing through the midst of them He went away." (Luke 4:30) "Let us pass over unto the other side." (Mark 4:35) "He entered into Jericho and was passing through." (Luke 19:1) Zacchaeus climbed up into a sycamore tree for Jesus was to pass that way." (Luke 19:4) "Two blind men sitting by the roadside when they heard that Jesus was passing by, cried out." (Mat. 20:30a) "They went on from there and passed through Galilee." (Mark 9:30) "As he passed he saw a man blind from his birth." (John 9:1) Following the resurrection in the beautiful Emmaus story: "They drew near to the village to which they were going. And he appeared to be going further." (Luke 24:28a)

He was busy all right. One has the impression that whoever sat down with Jesus had all of Jesus that there was for those moments, but that He would soon be off and moving to another place to help someone else. Samuel Johnson was bothered by the busyness of John Wesley. Boswell reports his hero saying, "Wesley's conversation is good, but he is never at leisure. He is always obliged to go at a certain hour. This is very disagreeable to a man who loves to fold his legs and have out his talk, as I do." 1 Like all who are propelled by a vision from within, Jesus was alive with a sense of all that remains to be done. "No time for rest till glows the western sky."

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But something more is involved in this passingness of Jesus. What is symbolized in the pageantry of Palm Sunday is that God speaks to men through actions in their history. If in what Whitehead called "The Galilean Vision" the eternal has been disclosed, then we know that God is not a problem to be solved, a proposition to be mastered, an essence to be discerned, but a worker to be joined. He is up to something in the world. He has a will for His creation that involves the whole universe. And He shares this work with us. It is a real work, not simply a made work to occupy us. It is a work in which even God Himself is becoming. One can rightly translate the awesome term "Yaweh" to

mean "I will be what I will be." "God is at work in the structures of the given world, in the concrete processes of every man's experience, in the galaxies as well as in sub-atomic phenomena, in the evolution of new biological species as well as in the development of metropolis." 2 So wrote Kenneth Cauthen.

And so God calls a people, Israel, to help Him work his purpose out. They were not called to settle down and build a lasting civilization. They were called to be a mobile, useful, servant people, bearers of a vision. Their prototype was Abraham who "went out now knowing whither he went." (Heb. 11:8) Their battle cry, "make straight in the desert a highway for our God." (Isaiah 40:3) The divine majesty that confronted and inspired them was always majesty in transit. A pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. A bush aflame, a small voice, now famine, then pestilence, here war, prophets coming and going, arriving and departing.

The Israelites knew God in the passingness of history, not in some isolated contemplation of the divine essence. The religious question is always the life question, and the life question is always the religious question. The points of decision to which we are called are to be found in our history, not in some disciplined mental removing of ourselves from history. And not in something that happened in the past in history, but in our current history. Why seek ye the living among the dead?" (Luke 24:5)

For us the God question is posed when we reckon with such things as race, and sex, and poverty, and war. When we are made to decide whether we will value for themselves money, property and status, or see them as a means to a higher end. There are people in the Christian church today who insist that the church should get back to "spiritual" matters. They imply that the issues of the day having to do with the city, poverty, race, national priorities, etc. are altogether extraneous to faith. I am trying to suggest that God confronts us in the ever moving events of our own history. It is in our actions and inactions that we know him or deny him. "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the



of the Lord." (Luke 12:13) He is always coming or moving off. He does not stay.

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The only proper response to a God who acts is a servant who obeys. The implicit cry of Palm Sunday can be summed up in two words: "Follow me!" Follow me to Gethsemane, to crucifixion, to resurrection, to witness and to service. Obedience is the method of understanding in the kingdom of God. When Jesus touched the lepers, he bade them go to the temple and show themselves to the priests. When he told them this their skin was still spotted. The record says that "as they went they were healed." (Mat. 8:4b) Their healing lay in their obedience. This is why Ralph Sockman is fond of noting that most of us enter the kingdom feet-first, rather than head-first.

But it is always obedience in some immediate situation that is required of us. The confrontation does not continue in one stand. The question will not be frozen at one point so that we can drop it at our pleasure and pick it up again later on. The inner three tried to freeze divine majesty on the Mount of Transfiguration so that it might stay for them and us. But Jesus rejected the notion of the three tabernacles, one for himself, one for Moses and one for Elijah. "Behold he goeth before you into Galilee." (Mat. 28:7) This is the tenor of New Testament thought. "So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and suddenly he was there in their path." (Mat. 28:8) This is where we find him.

There are voices that continually cry, "America, back to God!" As though there were some locus behind us to which we could make our way. Better to speak of America on to God. Better still, on with God. The majesty we reverence is always in transit. God is forever in motion. It was not for nothing that the early Christians were described as "followers of the Way." Moltmann says "The risen Lord encounters us as the living Lord, inasmuch as he is in motion, on the march towards his goal. He is still future to

Himself. With the resurrection, his work is not yet completed, not yet concluded." 3 How close are the way and the truth.

The majesty we see is always "Majesty in Transit," which is to say God comes to us in life situations. Not above them, or behind them, or around them, but through them. The majesty is always in transit but it does not render our life trivial. The way we respond to the glimpses of the majesty we see is a matter of life or death. God has a purpose. This is the stirring news of Palm Sunday. Man has a future else Jesus would not have said, "Follow me." He yearns to bring us back into alignment with a purpose that really matters.

All the world's a stage. We prefer not to be actors on that stage, but critics of those already in the action. The call of Palm Sunday is a call to participation in the work of God. It summons us to forego the stance of the critic and become a fellow-worker with God in the world.

Back in the days when men believed in the Ptolemaic view of the universe they comforted themselves with the illusion that earth was the center of everything. All the stars and planets and heavenly bodies rotated around the earth. When Copernicus discovered that the earth turned around the sun he shattered the composure of many. Some of us still hold a Ptolemaic view of ourselves and assume that the world turns for us. We see our small ventures as the hearts of what its all about.

The message of Palm Sunday is the good news that we need not stay in the back waters of some small unworthy purpose. God by His grace calls us into the mainstream of history to effect His will. When the majesty goes by and eternity speaks, the coin may drop for some. All the scattered fragments of their lives coalesce as they see themselves the servants of the living God for which they were born.

The difference between people is not that some have

seen the vision and others haven't. The difference is that some have been faithful to the vision and some have not.

"If thou hadst stayed I would have fled,  
this is what the vision said."

I have never exposed myself to the rigors of skiing. (Although I have frequently wished that my weekends might be as long and free as those of some of my lay friends.) I know that when one goes skiing he had better stick to the grade of slope that he can handle. When families go skiing, each member tends to go his separate way according to his ability. Out of a snow covered hill in New England a few weeks back came the story of a man who cried out half in desperation: "I lost my wife. I lost my children. And now I've lost my trail." Some of us may be in that fix today. For those who have lost the trail there is a majesty passing by. Above it a voice speaks out, "Follow me." "Behold thy king cometh unto thee, sitting on an ass's colt." (John 12:15)

"To every man there openeth  
a Way, and Ways, and a Way,  
And the High Soul climbs the High Way,  
And the Low Soul gropes the Low,  
And in between, on the misty flats,  
the rest drift to and fro.  
But to every man there openeth  
a High Way, and a Low,  
And every man decideth  
the Way his sould shall go." 4



## CLOSING PRAYER

Eyes we have, O God, but we see not,  
and ears but we do not hear.  
Help us to trace Thy form and discern  
Thy voice in what is going on  
within us and around us now.  
Sanctify to us our clock time by  
embracing it within Thy will,  
And lead us on.

Through Jesus Christ Our Lord.

Amen.

### FOOTNOTES:

1. Boswell, James, The Life of Samuel Johnson, p. 767  
Modern Library
2. Cauthen, Kenneth, Science, Secularization and God,  
p. 47, Abingdon Press, New York, 1967
3. Moltmann, Jurgen, Theology of Hope, pp. 86-7  
Harper & Row, New York, 1967
4. Oxenham, John, Selected Poems, edited by Charles  
L. Wallis, p. 47, Harper & Bros., New York, 1948





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