

Sermon Preached on
Sunday of the Passion (Palm Sunday)
(March 20, 2016)
"They Know Not"

Last week, the House of Bishops had its annual meeting, and it did something slightly unusual. It issued a letter to the whole church about the political state of the nation. I will read it now:

"On Good Friday the ruling political forces of the day tortured and executed an innocent man. They sacrificed the weak and the blameless to protect their own status and power. On the third day Jesus was raised from the dead, revealing not only their injustice but also unmasking the lie that might makes right. In a country still living under the shadow of the lynching tree, we are troubled by the violent forces being released by this season's political rhetoric. Americans are turning against their neighbors, particularly those on the margins of society. They seek to secure their own safety and security at the expense of others. There is legitimate reason to fear where this rhetoric and the actions arising from it might take us. In this moment, we resemble God's children wandering in the wilderness. We, like they, are struggling to find our way. They turned from following God and worshiped a golden calf constructed from their own wealth. The current rhetoric is leading us to construct a modern false idol out of power and privilege. We reject the idolatrous notion that we can ensure the safety of some by sacrificing the hopes of others. No matter where we fall on the political spectrum, we must respect the dignity of every human being and we must seek the common good above all else. We call for prayer for our country that a spirit of reconciliation will prevail and we will not betray our true selves."

The letter has received some criticism for being political, but it speaks to a legitimate fear I have heard voiced on all ends of the political spectrum that something different and frightening is happening. Republican, Democratic, and Independent friends have voiced concern of a breakdown in social order.

However, I think they missed an opportunity with their comparison of today to the Hebrews wandering in the wilderness. For my money, a more apt comparison would have been with those Jerusalemites in today's gospel.

I think this letter has a place in the sermon today - especially today - because it gives us a good feel for what the atmosphere was like during that first Holy Week. Things were tense, ready to explode, confusing. People were excited about one thing then another. Loving one moment, raging the next. They greeted Jesus as a savior one moment, then shouted for his death the next.

We ought to be able to relate - nobody knew what they were doing, and many were lashing out violently when it might not have been in their nature typically. Or at least, they didn't know it was in their nature. They - like us - did not know what they did. Times like this - where we don't know what we're doing - are more common than we want to admit. I remember when I was 18 and an exchange student in West Berlin, my

science teacher told us a story about when she was a teenager. It was in the waning days of World War II, and Josef Goebels was giving his infamous "Total War" speech at the Olympic Stadium. All the youth were required to be there, so she was there, of course. And she said Goebels had the crowd worked up into such a frenzy that when he shouted, "Do you want total war?" - which everyone knew would mean annihilation - they all screamed, "Yes! Yes! Yes!" It was only afterward, when she was walking home alone, that she burst into tears with the realization of what they had done.

We do not know what we are doing.

It's frightening - groups blame each other for increasingly escalating acts of violence, and there have even been promises of riots, depending on how the primaries go. It was no less frightening back then, only the one causing the stir was Jesus with his message of forgiveness, love, care for the poor and the stranger, and his critique of the rich and powerful. His entry into Jerusalem, as innocuous as it seems to us, set every leader on edge because they feared he would cause a revolution and destroy their way of life.

People truly did not know what to do, and it was not difficult to turn them from adulation to murder. No wonder Jesus said from the cross, "Forgive them, Father, for they do not know what they are doing."

Do WE know what we are doing in this strange world? We would do well to ask ourselves if we are also caught up in the fray, if we are also those who shout for blood. This day is the day of all when we acknowledge that we so easily turn from God's ways in the face of human temptations, whether they be fear, jealousy, rage.

Sometimes it feels hopeless now - as it did then. But we have an advantage. Unlike them, we know in whom we may hope. We don't know what this tense time will bring, but we can trust that the one whom all had supposed had been destroyed did in fact rise from death.

And so, we trust we will not be destroyed forever. We believe that in following his path of reconciliation, of caring for and respecting the dignity of every human being, we will bring life where it seems desolate.

We can trust that the one we follow will - in the end - lead to life for all who are willing to follow his lead.

So, it may well be true that we know not what we are doing these days. But we thank God that the one we follow, Jesus Christ, does. Amen.