

Palm Sunday

I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;

I did not hide my face
from insult and spitting.

The Lord GOD helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;
he who vindicates me is near.

Who will contend with me?
Let us stand up together.

Who are my adversaries?
Let them confront me.

It is the Lord GOD who helps me;
who will declare me guilty?

In a few days, on April 4, our nation will mark the fiftieth anniversary of the killing of Martin Luther King Jr.

There will be speeches, the laying of wreathes, and the tolling of bells,
the things we do to mark solemn anniversaries and great loss.

The church gathers, in an even more solemn mode, every Passion Sunday,
to preach, and wave palms, and toll bells, for the death of the Savior of the world.

Martin, the great man, learned much from Jesus Christ, the Savior,
about the necessity of public suffering and sacrifice,
when a great change must be sought.

The Lord entered the holy city in high style,
with shouts of victory and a lowly splendor,
drawing the wrong kind of attention,
on the way to his willing suffering on the Cross.

Dr. King led the faithful black Christians of the South,
into Birmingham, Montgomery, and Albany,
inviting the violence of the mobs and authorities
and responding only with non-violent acceptance of the blows that rained down upon them.

The Lord showed the world the depth of divine love in his willing death;
King and those who worked him showed how much disciples of Jesus
would be willing to suffer to change the world.

This is a biblical model for how the world is changed.

Isaiah cried hundreds of years before “I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard. I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.”

Speaking as a suffering servant, Isaiah said he feared no adversaries and no confrontation, because the Lord God would help him.

Indeed, to suffering willingly and righteously,
in the confidence of the vindicating power of God,
is to lean on the lever of history with enormous strength.

We remember Peter and Paul and James and others,
who gave their lives as they testified to the Gospel and made a global church.

We remember the children of Birmingham,
strafed with fire hoses and set upon by police dogs,
who brought segregation down.

We remember the man who went to Memphis, haunted as he was by fatal premonitions,
whose witness changed a nation.

And we worship a Savior who endured torture and death, knowing that a Resurrection awaited.

All these faced what they faced by knowing their cause was just,

because it was the cause of God

and knowing that a divine vindication would be not just for them,
but for the world.

By willing suffering, they changed the world.

I bet you don't feel much like a hero or a savior.

Your life, like mine, is pretty small and largely concerned with the stuff of daily life.

There is not much opportunity to suffer for a cause
and to hope for a transforming divine vindication.

But I think there is this: everyone of us can find ourselves some measure braver,

if we know that we live in the good will of God,

if we know there is an eternal dimension to life,

if we live with a sense that our lives truly are in God's hands.

It is the Lord GOD who helps me;

who will declare me guilty?

If we know that we have been saved by Christ's death and resurrection,
we are free from the fears that would prevent us from us from sharing in Christ's redeeming work
in our own lives.

We need not hide and we can face any adversity.

If violence finds us, we know God will defeat it with life and love,

as God has through the cross and Resurrection of Jesus.