

Fools for Christ

A Sermon for Palm Sunday

Yesterday was April Fools Day, the day for pranks. One of the great pranks of all times was the spaghetti-tree hoax in 1957. That day the leading BBC anchorman began the news with a story about the spaghetti growing on trees in Switzerland. He reported that there was a good crop because it had been a mild season, and they had conquered the spaghetti weasel. The newscaster then showed pictures of people taking the spaghetti off the trees. They talked about the problem of growing each strand the same length. It was magnificent because at that time there were many people unfamiliar with spaghetti because it was an exotic food for Great Britain. People watching the news accepted this news story as true.

There have been other such pranks. There is the one about the left-handed burger. In 1998 Burger King ran an ad in USA Today for their new left-handed burger that would be easier for left-handed people to hold and eat. Thousands of people wrote in asking which locations sold these burgers.

In 1976 in England on April Fools Day an astronomer named Patrick Moore reported that at 9:47 a.m. there would be once in a lifetime event as Pluto would pass behind Jupiter which would cause a gravitational change, and if you jumped up just at that moment you would have the feeling of floating. Many people said they tried this and it worked!

What is April Fools Day about? It has to do with the lunar calendar. The New Year comes between March 27th and April 2nd. There has been this day celebrating this change. In France they celebrate what they call "King for a Day." They serve a special cake called the Galette. The one who gets the piece of cake in which there is a trinket of some sort is king for the day.

In ancient times when they were celebrating the calendar based on the sun, moving back to December, the winter solstice was somewhere between the 17th and the 28th of December. Then they had the celebration of Januarius (where we get January). In ancient Mesopotamia there was one who was king for the day. In Mesopotamia that person really was king for the day and he could do anything that day except extend it beyond the one day. When the day was over, he was killed.

April Fools is a day for fun and charades. Whatever the origin was, it is now a time of pranks and jokes. It is a great thing to have April Fools Day fall between Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday.

In some churches on Palm Sunday they take the Palms and process and sing. They may have three to five readers who read the whole story for Palm Sunday through Good Friday. It can be very dramatic and impressive. Prepare the way for the king! Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low (based on Isaiah 40). Prepare the way for the king! Of course, what is ironic is that the same crowd that sang Hosanna five days later shouted: Crucify him!

What I would really like is to have April Fools' Day on Good Friday. This is the greatest cosmic joke of all time. When we go back to the early church in the first centuries, some of the church fathers described what happened on the cross in terms of a fishing expedition. God had set out Jesus as the bait on the hook and Satan had bit and was caught and destroyed. It is cosmic irony and it is playing on 1 Cor: 2:8: "None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory." If they knew they were doing themselves in, they would not have done it. But they did and were done in.

At many of the churches in the more liberal tradition they have what they call the clown mass or clown worship close to April Fools' Day with the idea that that's appropriate. The worship celebrants are dressed as clowns to show that everything has been changed because of this cosmic irony.

Then there is the Monty Python comedy from 1979, "The Life of Brian," which is a parody of the life of Christ in which this funny little figure is caught and crucified. There's a lot of humor about it, but is that proper? It almost raises the question of the Black Mass of the Wiccans in which they do the communion service backwards in order to mock it.

What do we say about that? About irony and humor. Is Christianity one great charade and joke? How do you separate appearance and reality? What is the difference between Christianity and Star Wars? The force overcomes evil and all kinds of fantastic things happening. How is this any different?

It is appropriate that we use this text from Philippians 2: 5-11 today. It is generally said by scholars that this section is an early Christian hymn. You can recognize it when you realize for the early Christians poetry, as in the Psalms, is based on parallelism. If you set this out in the original language, it is very much a hymn like

that. But Paul changed it in one way. This is significant for what we are doing and what Christianity is about.

This early hymn is praising the victory Christ has won. It goes like this:

“Have this mind among yourselves which you have in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped. He emptied himself taking the form of a servant, born in the likeness of men, and being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, **even death on a cross.** Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him a name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Right in the middle Paul adds “even death on a cross.” It is generally recognized that Paul adds this to make sure that what we are about is rooted and based on something that happened in history, an event which is not a fantasy, not a charade. There have been all kinds of things, even in our day, such as the Da Vinci Code and the like, but also going back to ancient times when the gnostic theologians said: “Of course Jesus came, but it was all a charade.” God did not really die. Just before he was to die on the cross, he went up to heaven, and a substitute died on the cross, and that was it. The resurrection is just in your thinking about it, not the way it really happened.

How can you say God really died? Who took care of the universe between Good Friday and Sunday? How could God the Father suffer? All that kind of thinking leads us astray. It is important to realize what Paul did by adding “even death on a cross,” and how Luther very specifically said: “God died.” His friend Johannes Brenz said the same thing: “God died.” How do we know about and understand that? We do not because we are limited and we are sinful and we can’t.

But this is the event that determines all other events. It is the most important event for all times and for the universe. Therefore we can be humorous. Christians are the ones who truly can have a sense of humor. Most humor is based on the tragic difference between appearance and reality. But for Christians it is because we know what it is all really about. We have the certainty and therefore the freedom to rejoice in a way that is far different from humor in general.

We can make fun of almost anything. Luther had a great sense of humor. He made fun of the devil. He made fun of his own life. But finally that which is basic is that which we honor because that is what makes all the difference.

At the same time we remember, as Paul reminds us in 1 Cor 4:10, that we can be “fools for Christ” because when we are weak, he is strong. In 1 Cor 1:18-25 Paul has a whole discussion of how we are based on the cross, which is foolishness to the Greeks and a scandal to the Jews, but for us who are called, we know this is the answer to everything: Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

That is what we celebrate this Holy Week, how God changed everything and therefore we are certain and free. Amen