Book 2

Sunday April 15, 1973

"NOT ONLY A PALM SUNDAY EXPERIENCE" Mark 11:1-10

And many spread their garments on the road and others spread leafy branches. . . And those who went before and those who followed cried out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me." They began to be sorrowful, and to say to him one after another, "Is it I?"

And Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away." But Peter said, "Even though they all fall away, I will not." And Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times." But Peter said vehemently, "If I must die with you, I will not deny you." And they all said the same.

Later when Jesus was on trial and Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the maids of the high priest came and seeing Peter warming himself, she looked at him and said, "You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus." But he denied it, saying, "I neither know nor understand what you mean. And later the maid saw him and said to the bystanders, "This man was one of them." But again Peter denied it. And after a little while again the bystanders said to Peter, "Certainly you are one of them; for you are a Galilean." But Peter began to swear and say, "I do not know this man of whom you speak."

And Pilate said to the crowd, "What shall I do with the man whom you call King of the Jews? And they cried out again, "Crucify him!" And Pilate said to them, "Why what evil has he done?" But they shouted all the more, "Crucify him!" So Pilate wishing to satisfy the crowd, released for them Barabbas; and having scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified.

And when the centurion, who stood facing Jesus after he died saw that he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!"

All of these events happened within 6 days. Let's consider this morning how the events of Palm Sunday and Holy week are also a description of life itself and particularly the Christian life.

To begin with, Palm Sunday is remembered as a day of enthusiasm and joy. On that first Palm Sunday, we remember the crowds meeting Jesus and hailing him as King of the Jews. All the people along the road to Jerusalem were in a festive mood, not only because Jesus was riding along, but also because the people were going up to Jerusalem to the temple to celebrate a religious holiday.

Coupled with the natural high spirits of the holiday, some along the way surely thought that here was a new king who would save his people. Others had heard about Jesus and perhaps some in the crowd had been helped by him. Here was their new leader. Now all of their problems would be solved.

Most of us when we enter the Christian faith, when we first hail Christ, also do so on a note of enthusiasm and joy. Some of us, like many in that crowd on the first Palm Sunday, call Christ our Lord and King, even though we may not be too sure of what that means or what the implications of that confession are. Still,in an act of faith and devotion, we join with God's people.

When children are baptized there is usually a great deal of joy in the family, relatives are invited in for a big dinner and everyone has a good time. And sometimes if we were asked, we might not be able to explain all the joy that we feel on such an occasion. We may even think that Baptism means something quite different from what it really is. But Jesus doesn't frown on our joy and enthusiasm.

Today, as in other years, when those in the Confirmation class joined the church, there is great joy and enthusiasm and excitement among the members of the class and also among family and friends. Again, we may not be able to adequately explain all that we feel. We simply know that something good, important and significant is happening.

Our lives need moments like that. One of the things I have always liked about Palm Sunday is the sponaneity of devotion that was present as the crowds greeted Jesus.

There was no debate about it -- no cautious trial balance to see whether or not the risk of throwing the clothes down was really worth it; no wondering if some show of respect and devotion at a cheaper price might not be enough. These people were lifted on a tide of joy and hope.

I feel sorry for the life that never forgets itself in a great lift of devotion; for such a life is poor and unexciting, no matter how richly upholstered its furniture.

A person has certainly missed some of the joy of life if he or she has not felt the upsurge of enthusiasm that the Pilgrims expressed for Christ on that first Palm Sunday. Every life needs its Palm Sunday experiences and attitudes. We need it when we join the church and we need it at other times as well.

Such spontaneous, self-forgetting enthusiasm is indispensable to the work of Christianity in the world. We need more of this kind of almost reckless devotion to the cause of God in our lives and in the life of the world.

Jesus encouraged this kind of devotion and enthusiasm even though at times like Palm Sunday he knew that the people were expecting the Messiah to be something different than he turned out to be.

Following Palm Sunday, a few days later, Jesus was visiting in a home in Bethany. There was a woman there who came inpulsively with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment to annoint the head of Jesus in his hour of difficulty and danger. It was an impulsive thing to do. It might be a little difficult to defend in the cold light of reason. It certainly seemed extravagant. If we had been present, we certainly might find ourselves thinking that. And sure enough there were some there who thought it and said it. "She shouldn't have done it. That expensive ointment could've been sold and the money used for helping the poor."

Yet I doubt that those who said such things were those who gave very much to the poor themselves. But they were the inevitable cynics, the coldwater pourers, the people who had never done a beautiful extravagant thing for someone else in their lives; and now they had to criticize what the woman had done in her act of devotion; they had to do their best to spoil it.

Well, it wasn't those careful, unimaginative people that Jesus agreed with. He agreed with the woman. He liked what she had done. He appreciated it--the beauty of it, the enthusiasm, the spontaneous devotion.

And on that first Palm Sunday there were the cynical people who didn't care for the enthusiasm and devotion that the

crowd was showing. Some even asked Jesus to stop the demonstration; to restrain his followers.

But Jesus didn't stop the shouting. And at the same time, I'm sure that he didn't have any illusions about the crowd that day. Even though feeling was running high and the devotion great, certainly Jesus knew that the crowd's enthusiasm would be short-lived; he knew that many of them would later turn against him and desert him; he knew that some of the devotion and enthusiasm was misguided; that some of the people expected him to be a different kind of Messiah than he was. Yet Jesus accepted their worship in a loving patient way. And he accepts our devotion, our enthusiasm in the same way, even though it is often short-lived and has varied motivations.

Thus the Palm Sunday experience says to us--there is a place in our Christian faith, in our church membership, in our joining the church, in life itself, for enthusiasm, for a kind of overflowing devotion. There is a place for simple, open, unfettered joy.

Enthusiasm of course can be mis-used and mis-appropiated by a Hitler, or a Napoleon, or some other false god--but that does not invalidate it. Quite the contrary. Jesus, as we have seen, admired honest enthusiasm even in forthright sinners. It was the righteous grim repression of the Pharisees and those like them that Jesus frowned upon.

So Palm Sunday says to those who are joining the church today or next week, or whenever, and to all of us; don't let your enthusiasm be quenched by others who would disparage it. And we do often let that happen as we grow older.

There is many a person who in his or her youth was capable of generous enthusiasm and dedicated devotion, who had a sparkle and a spirit, but who got caught up in the love of material prosperity and the drive for success and the spirit stiffened and the life narrowed and now he or she could'nt shout hosanna if their life depended on it.

Many of us as we grow older are much too careful about our enthusiasm and we wouldn't inconvenience ourselves much now for the high Christian causes we once cared for. We let loose no spontaneous devotion. We are too much people of the world now--cool and calm all the time. Our spirits

become dampened and we miss enjoying much of the life that is around us.

So I say to you, men and women, young people and longer living people, and particularly to those of you who joined the church today--if you are going to be Christians at all, don't let yourselves have the safe, conventional kind of Christianity that never runs away with you. Dare great things for God. Someone has said that a good translation for "Hallelujah," is simply shouting, "Hurray for God." We need more of that in our lives. We need more of that in our worship. We need more of that in our singing. Smile and sing. To those of you who have that kind of spirit--life will be an exciting adventure. You will find yourselves enjoying God and his world and being of more service to others at the same time.

The Christian faith, yours and mine, needs its Palm Sunday experiences.

But it would not be telling the whole story of the Christian life and of belonging to the church if we did not also point out that the Christian life, indeed life itself in this world, our relationship to God and to others is not only a Palm Sunday experience.

There is more to life, more to joining the church, more to following Jesus Christ, than just the enthusiasm of Palm Sunday. We need to see Palm Sunday in relation to the other events which followed it during the week.

While there is much enthusiasm and rejoicing today in those who are joining the church and while there is much enthusiasm and joy within all of us at times, and we need to have it--the events which followed Palm Sunday also remind us that there will be times in our lives and in our faith which are like Maundy Thursday--times of denial, betrayal; times of desertion, times when we sort of stumble along in our faith at a distance.

And there will be experiences in our lives and our faith which correspond to Good Friday--times when we feel that all is lost, that our faith is dying and is dead; times when we feel that all the good we have tried to do is being crucified and is for nothing; times when we feel that God has forsaken us, indeed that God is dead or has forsaken us. There will come times of doubt, of questioning; times

when we wonder if there is anything we can believe; times when we find it difficult to pray; times when we wonder what's the use of it all. We know these feelings. We've had them before.

It is in those times when we simply need to be faithful to faith itself; to continue in our practice of the Christian life, and if we persist there will always be the Easter Days--the days and times when we know that our faith is resurrected and renewed--the days of joy when we know that God is with us and for us in a fresh way.

You see, on that first Palm Sunday, in the deepest sense and even without knowing it then, the enthusiasts were right. Jesus was King. But he was a king in a way the crowd could not have imagined. Thus the problem of enthusiasm is not a problem of suppression, but of direction and deepening. Our enthusiasm and devotion can be led into a deeper, lasting loyalty.

However we will always go through Maunday Thursday periods, Good Friday periods and others. But these will be followed by nothing less than Easter itself.