Book 12

Palm Sunday, March 27, 1983

"THE TEMPTATION OF PALM SUNDAY"

(Continuing the series on the Lord's Prayer)

Luke 19:28-40

"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

Palm Sunday and the events which follow it, those that make up Holy Week, dramatize for us in an unforgettable fashion the fact that decisions are a part of life. There are big decisions and little decisions, and there are decisions we want to avoid, but cannot. There are some decisions we are forced to make.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday, people had to decide -- either they were for him or they were against him. No doubt many people resented his coming precisely for that reason -- it forced a decision. What a relief it would have been on that first Palm Sunday if the people had not had to confront Jesus. If only they could have dodged the issue and done nothing about him.

Later in the week, Pontius Pilate tried to avoid the issue and the decision. Accepting Christ was preposterous, yet crucifying him was distasteful. Why did he have to have anything to do with Christ? But it was one of life's forced decisions. Washing his hands of it publicly after letting the authorities take Jesus to be crucified did not alter the fact that he had to decide one way or the other -- to let Jesus go, or hand him over.

Now let's look at another fact. Each decision we have to make also confronts us with temptations. There is the temptation to find an easy way out. There is the temptation to try to avoid the issue altogether. There is the temptation to do the right thing for the wrong reason. There is the temptation to have the end justify the means. We say to ourselves, "Even though what I am doing is wrong, the over-all outcome will be for the good of all."

Jesus Christ knew about temptation. He had been tempted many times in his life. He knew how dangerous temptation can be, how subtle, how beguiling, how alluring. Here

on Palm Sunday, people were hailing him as the new King. How wonderful it is to be applauded by the crowd. Yet Jesus, to his credit, knew that for the most part the cheering would be short-lived and that a lot of it was for the wrong reason. People expected him to be the new liberator, the new King David, the leader of a political revolution which would throw the Romans out of Israel.

He knew that when he spoke of victory, they thought of victory in battle. When he spoke of liberty, many thought only of political liberty. But Jesus went beyond that: "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." When he spoke of strength and power, people thought primarily of armed force and weapons and physical strength. But he was speaking of the strength that comes from within.

How tempting it is to see things the way we want to see them and never question our basic assumptions.

And here is where the Lord's Prayer connects with Palm Sunday. We are to pray, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil," which is to say, "Let nothing become a temptation to us," or, "Keep us from giving in to temptation and thereby deliver us from evil."

Jesus knew that life is dangerous, that it is something that can trip us up and ruin us, that we can come to a place where we stake everything on the wrong card. Temptation can separate us from God and lead us to rely on false gods.

We hardly ever separate ourselves from God by standing up and shaking our fist and renouncing God with a planned defiance. Most often the decision against God is made in a gradual way, almost unnoticed. The same thing often happens in marriages: people gradually grow apart, a little bit each day, and then there comes the time when they find there is nothing left between them.

Also, seemingly good and noble causes can also tempt us away from God, or can come between us and God. Anything can become a temptation. Anything can become a false god -- the drive for success; the accumulation of power, even though we tell ourselves that we are going to use the personal power for just causes.

Temptation most often comes dressed up in positive clothes. The tempter does not say, "Come, I'll teach you something evil; I'll show you a sin." Rather, the temptation is, "Come, I will teach you something interesting, something pleasurable, something that will give you a glorious thrill and give you a chance to live to the full."

Jesus did not say, "It is impossible for a harlot to enter the Kingdom of God." He did say, "How difficult it is for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God." Not that riches of any kind are bad in themselves. He was not talking about crude hucksters -- but people of culture and an ordered way of life, with rich and broad minds, and yet imperiled by all the treasures of culture and education.

Remember the tempter in the wilderness made nothing but grand and captivating proposals to Jesus. He appealed to his idealism, to his piety, and even to the Word of God. The tempter suggested to Jesus the incredible idea of controlling all humanity by offering him all the kingdoms of this world, and still there was only one thing the tempter wanted, and that was to separate him from God, with the help of these grand ideas which might well intoxicate a human mind.

When we give in to the temptation to do something without God, this may result at first in great success. The worship of success is the most tempting false god of all. Soon we believe that we are responsible for everything that has happened, and after that we find ourselves separated from God.

Fanatics are often successful for a time in worldly terms. To be a fanatic means that one lives and works in such a way that one no longer sees anything but his or her goal, that one refuses to entertain the slightest questioning of the struggles. Motives are no longer questioned. The question as to whether the goal is good or bad is put aside. For once I begin to ask questions, that could immediately upset my enthusiasm and fill me with scruples and misgivings, which might be detrimental to my fanatical singlemindedness. But my fanatical devotion produces great success. So we need to pray, "Let nothing become a temptation to us," or, "Keep us from giving into temptation and deliver us from evil."

Now, let's return to Palm Sunday again. What are some of the temptations that it points to as far as we are concerned?

1. First, there is the temptation to put too much trust in the sensational, in action all by itself, in that which appeals to emotions and leaves reason behind. I love a parade as much as anyone -- flags flying, bands marching, crowds applauding. It's exciting. We need the Palm Sundays in our lives -- the times of celebration.

However, the temptation is to believe that this is where the action is, that with enough shouting and cheering, enough media coverage, enough fame, we will solve the problems of the world. If we can only have enough rallies, enough demonstrations, then good will result. Jesus was not fooled by what was going on around him, even though he accepted the enthusiasm and devotion of the crowd.

2. A second temptation which Palm Sunday symbolizes is our tendency to want to trust almost solely in earthly worldly power. Many people in that first Palm Sunday celebration firmly believed that with the right leader, Israel could be restored to its former glory as a world power and that if this happened, it would solve all their problems. So they hailed Jesus as their new King, but he knew better.

We make the same mistake over and over again. We want to believe that if only we have the right persons in office, if our country is once again strong as a world power, then our problems will for the most part be solved. How easily we are tempted to put all our trust in power and influence.

Jesus quite consciously passed up the great chances and moments for making propaganda in his life. When he might have taken advantage of the wildest ovations of enthusiastic hearers, he made his way through the midst of them and went away to be alone with God or to help a sick person or a burdened conscience. He knew, too, how fickle crowds can be.

3. A third temptation which is illustrated by Palm Sunday is our tendency to oversimplify the enemy. Many of the people in the crowd that first Palm Sunday believed

that if Jesus would become their earthly king and lead the revolution to overcome the Romans, the Kingdom of God could then be established.

We always like to see the enemy as someone else. Rome was an enemy, but there were others, as well. In our time, we may rightly perceive the Soviet Union as a threat, but let that not mislead us into covering up our own faults or think that is our only threat or enemy or problem.

We need to pray, "Keep us from giving into temptation and deliver us from evil."

Keep us also from giving into the temptation of believing that God is only on our side because we are righteous and everyone else is evil. That's the most misleading temptation of all.

All this does not mean that life should not have its celebrations. Being aware of the temptations of Palm Sunday, we can go on to our celebrating. There is a place in our Christian faith, in life itself, for enthusiasm, for overflowing devotion, for shouting Hosanna.

Although enthusiasm and devotion can be misused and misappropriated, that does not invalidate it. Jesus admired and accepted honest enthusiasm, even in forthright sinners. It was the self-righteous, grim repressing attitude of the over-religious that Jesus frowned upon. And there were those in the crowd that day, too.

Some said, "Tell your disciples to be quiet and to be more decent and orderly," but Jesus replied, "I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out."

So it is that Palm Sunday and this petition from the Lord's Prayer connect. Later that same week, several days after Palm Sunday, when Jesus was praying alone, he found his disciples asleep. His advice to them then was, "Watch and pray, that you may not enter into temptation."

The only way to overcome temptation is through regular prayer. We cannot overcome it on our own power. So long as we stand within God's field of power, no other

power can touch us. God has promised to be with us in temptation, and even those who fall, God pursues and raises up again.

The ultimate temptation is to be with Christ on Palm Sunday, but not on Thursday or Friday of Holy Week. The temptation is to avoid the crosses in life and to believe there is such a thing as painless progress. There is always the temptation to want to avoid self-denial.

Self-denial does not mean self-debasement with the attitude of, "I am nothing," or, "I am a worthless sinner." Rather, self-denial means a willingness to be involved in the spiritual and social solutions in society. Remember in the Lord's Prayer we pray, "Deliver us from evil." We are not asking to be delivered from grief or pain, or sorrow or failure, but evil.

Every human being has the potential for violence erupting from within oneself. So often we want to cast out evil by using evil means.

And so on Palm Sunday we need to pray especially, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." In so doing, we are asking God to move deeply into our lives so that we will be able to overcome the temptation of becoming a destructive, negative person. Rather, we will be able to celebrate Christ as the true ruler of the world. Amen.