Palm Sunday, April 15, 1984
THE USE AND MISUSE OF POWER
Matthew 21:1-11

The story of Palm Sunday has always been a popular one. It takes hold of our imaginations, partly because of its contrast with the tragic days that came later that same week, but more particularly because parades and celebrations attract people of all kinds.

To put it another way, a colorful ceremony in conjunction with a holiday is always appealing. It's a change of pace from the usual order of things. The city of Jerusalem was preparing itself for the celebration of the "Passover," one of the most important, if not the most important, holiday for the Jews. People had come and were coming to the holy city from near and far.

Jerusalem was no stranger to celebrations and processions. King Solomon's reign had been inaugurated in that city. The Queen of Sheba had come to visit. There had been in the past many parades which welcomed Jewish military heroes from their successful wars. There were, no doubt, some in the city who could remember how King Herod the Great had come riding into the city at the head of an army to occupy the city.

But today another kind of king was entering the city. He was not on a large white or black horse. He was not accompanied by hundreds of soldiers marching in strict cadence. There were no disciplined ranks, no glittering helmets, no shiny swords, no battle chariots, no mounted trumpeters to announce his coming.

It was a different kind of parade. A humble teacher, riding on a donkey, an animal of lowliness and peace, plodding on a donkey, an animal of lowliness and peace, plodding along quite in contrast to a plunging war horse. Gathered around this figure on a donkey was a small group of disciples.

But enthusiasm is contagious, especially on a holiday, and within a short time hymns and shouts passed from mouth to mouth, and religious fervor and patriotic zeal took hold of the crowd. Running on ahead, they drew down their cloaks and spread them before him, shouting, "Hosanna!" which is to say, "Now save us! Blessed is the one that comes in the name of God!"

There is a naïve sincerity and spontaneity about such devotion that is attractive and tempting, but Jesus was not fooled by the crowd's enthusiasm. He knew it was misguided and short-lived. Ordinarily Jesus avoided crowds and the spectacular. Although his healings drew large crowds, they were a source of embarrassment to him. Crowds can be fickle. Crowds also exert pressure and power.

Jesus knew about the use and misuse of power. He was aware that most people misunderstand power. We usually think of power in terms of armed forces and physical might. And that's what the crowd wanted that day: a new earthly ruler who would lead them to victory over the Romans and who would make their nation number one!

Jesus accepted the crowd's enthusiastic devotion but did not misuse it or exploit it. And that had been true of his ministry all along. He knew when to use his power and when not to use it.

For example, Jesus was by no means above using his power to rescue people when he found them caught in circumstance from which they could not extricate themselves. During this

Lenten season we have looked at some examples of direct intervention into the lives of others as he healed them of their diseases and handicaps.

Last Sunday we heard the story of the four friends who brought a paralyzed man to Jesus that he might be healed. Jesus looked into the soul of that one and spoke of forgiveness, and then said to the man, “Rise, take up your bed and walk,” and, to everyone’s amazement, the man did it.

Jesus was willing to use his power to help rescue people, to get them out of the entrapments into which they had somehow gotten themselves, and he makes it clear in his teachings that we are to do the same.

Who can hear his parable of the last judgment and not realize that what we choose to do with the power that has been entrusted to us is the hinge issue for all eternity? Those on the right hand who were invited to enter into God’s eternal joy were those who had seen people in desperate and needy circumstances and had been willing to use their power they way Jesus used his — to help and release and liberate. “I was hungry, and you gave me good; I was thirsty, and you gave me drink; I was naked, and you clothed me; I was sick and in prison and you visited me.”

Jesus showed us that we are made in the image of a generous God who blesses and helps us and who expects us to do the same with the power we have.

On the other hand, while Jesus was willing to use his power to help others, he was very careful not to misuse it so that it perpetuated a relationship of permanent dependency. Whenever he encountered the broken and the helpless, he did not gather them up in his arms and say in effect, “Let me carry you around for the rest of your life.” On the contrary, having released the paralytic from his immobilizing guilt, Jesus immediately said, “Rise, take up your bed and walk” — that is, immediately begin to use your own power to carry that which heretofore carried you.

In a similar way, after Jesus had healed another man, that individual wanted to remain with Jesus and follow along in his shadow. Jesus gently refused that request and told the man, “You must go back to your own home and tell the people there the good thing that God has done for you, how mercy has broken in and blessed your life.”

The 12th step in the Alcoholics Anonymous program carries forth this same theme. It reads, “Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs.” When you have been helped, then use your power to help others in need.

Jesus knew it was a misuse of power to help someone and then through that help establish a permanent relationship of dependency. First of all, no human being is good enough or strong enough or permanent enough to be a father or mother figure or to provide for us totally forever. Only the living God is capable of fulfilling that kind of role, and we make a grave mistake if we put another human being on that kind of pedestal and expect that one to be everything for us.

Furthermore, whenever we overestimate someone else’s power, we at the same time discount our own, and we can become permanently dependent on someone else. Jesus taught that each one of us has been endowed with power of our own, and when we have the image of ourselves as helpless victims, we are not being true to all that is within us by the grace of creation. Permanent dependency does not work. It is a misuse of power.

What Jesus did was to take hundreds of ordinary people who had seen themselves as powerless and worthless and awaken them to the marvelous power that was within them.

Sheldon Kopp, a Jewish psychotherapist, has written a book entitled, If you Meet Buddha on the Road, Kill Him. His point is that if you encounter anyone who claims he can do everything for you and solve all your problems, the wisest thing you can do is to move to kill that illusion immediately. Kopp points out that many times patients come to him the way a little child takes a broken toy to a parent and say, "Please, fix this for me. You have strength; I have none. Do something about my problem without it costing me any pain or effort."

Kopp's whole book challenges this form of helping. Jesus Christ also challenged this form of helping. It is a misuse of power. He was again and again willing to use His power to rescue individuals, and he calls us to do the same. But he was also careful not to take what is appropriate under certain circumstances and elevate it into a permanent way of life.

In the same way that Jesus was not willing to misuse his power with individuals, he was also not willing to misuse his power on a larger scale. He refused to become the worldly leader or second King David, a role that many in the Palm Sunday crowd expected him to fulfill or hoped he would fulfill.

Think about it. What courage it took for him to come as the Messiah, but not as the King or General to use physical force or military might in order to shatter the yoke or oppression! Rather, Jesus came in peace and for peace.

What courage it also took for him to come as the Messiah, but not merely for patriotic and virtuous Jews, but for everyone, including prostitutes, tax collectors and outcasts, and for you and me. No one is excluded from God's love. When Jesus spoke of enlarged borders and a greater destiny, he was not speaking of conquest and more territory; rather, he was talking of broader sympathies and broken barriers of class and race. "God so loved the world, the whole world and everyone in it, that God came in Christ."

God's power as seen in Jesus works in ways that contradict the kind of power we usually support and worship.

Let us not, however, make the mistake so frequently made by Christians of believing that Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the back of a lowly donkey to demonstrate that he was a spiritual Messiah as opposed to a political Messiah. Later in the week, he was not nailed to the cross for being too spiritual, but for being too political.

As is often the case, his enemies understood him better than many of his closest followers. He was executed for his politics, which were labeled as treasonous. Jesus never retreated from the crucial social issues of his day into a world of private piety. AS firmly as any before him, he stood for the oppressed against the oppressor, and in true prophetic tradition, he saw that the real troublemakers of this world are not ignorant, but the intelligent and corrupt.

The common people heard him gladly because he spoke against the evils of oppression and corruption in high places, but the common people did not hear him gladly when he spoke against the evil of violence.

As Jesus saw it, the problem with violent revolution is not that it changes too much, but that it changes too little. One form of oppression is replaced with another form of oppression. Non-violence is more radical than violence. The human nature that Jesus knew so well had taught him that violence leads to lies, just as lies need violence to defend them. Violence is a misuse of power.

Thus, Jesus prayed, not for the second coming of the kingdom of David, which is what the crowds wanted that first Palm Sunday. Rather, Jesus prayed that God' kingdom would come among them and within them. And he knew this kingdom could only come through love, through the kind of suffering love that was not afraid to die when necessary. This kind of love never inflicts suffering but takes on suffering.

This kind of leader is not easy to follow. Later in the week the crowd turned against him. WE prefer one who tells us what we want to hear; the kind that comes on a white horse with two six-guns strapped to his belt, who sits tall in the saddle. Like the crowd on that first Palm Sunday, we like to believe there is a military solution to every problem.

But Jesus Christ, the leader of all leaders, rides on a lowly donkey, his only weapon being the love of God, and he invites us to join in his parade on the road to the holy city. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of God. Amen.