Book 20

Sunday April 8, 1990

"THE SUCCESSFUL FAILURE" Matthew 21:1-11

The people of Israel, especially those who had come to the capital city of Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of the Passover, were hungry for success. For too long their nation had been demeaned by the occupying forces of the Roman Empire and stripped of the right to self-determination. Futhermore, the Passover holiday itself was a time to remember their success years earlier when Moses had led them out of slavery in Egypt to their own promised land.

They also remembered the glorious days when David was King, then their enemies were slaughtered and battles were won. Then their nation was a power to be respected. King David was followed by Solomon who built the temple. For too long now they felt they had been deprived of their dignity as an independent people. They were ready for a revolution. They longed for the coming of the One who would lead them in the fight to throw out the Romans. After all, didn't the prophets point to a day when there would appear an anointed One of God, a king greater than David?

Some people were convinced that Jesus was the One of whom the prophets spoke. They had heard of his miracles. There was even a story circulating through the crowds that he had raised

a man named Lazarus from the dead.

So when Jesus rode into Jerusalem they gave him the royal treatment, paving the road with their own clothing and with palm branches. Joyous shouts filled the air as the hopeful procession moved toward Jerusalem. Jubilantly the people proclaimed Jesus King. Who can resist the Anointed of God? What can Caesar do in the face of One who comes in the power of the Almighty? With God on his side, Jesus would be the inevitable winner in whatever contest might develop.

The right leader will save us. It's a popular theme. A tribe or nation or some other collection of people, perhaps a city or town is in trouble. The bad people are in control. There is no one available to throw the bad people out. Then the hero or heroine arrives, white hat, white horse, two guns, and almost single-handed, the enemy is defeated.

We see this belief at work in politics. Over and over again we believe that if only the right person is elected, he or she will be able to put all things back in order. Taxes will not be raised. The crime rate will go down. The drug problem will be solved. Whoever the enemies are, they will be put in their place, and everyone will live happily ever after. It's a tempting

dream. We want to believe our hero or heroine will save us. This kind of dream is usually based on the assumption that in addition to the right leader, we need the kind of power that comes from military strength so that our enemies can be destroyed.

If ever we were given a picture of the success of the ministry of Jesus, this is it. On that first Palm Sunday, Jesus appeared to be riding not only on a donkey, but on an unstoppable wave of popularity.

Although Jesus accepted the praise and joy of the crowd; he did not try to stop their singing and shouting; he was not fooled by it. He knew that this kind of popularity was fragil because it was based on the crowd's perception of what they wanted him to be instead of who he truly was. The hosannas which rang around him were cries of the right words for the wrong reasons; "blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." The crowd thought of success in terms of worldly power and the winning of military victories.

But Jesus knew otherwise. Thus the Palm Sunday story as the Gospel of Luke reports it, says that when Jesus drew near and saw the city of Jerusalem he wept over it, saying, "Would that

even today you knew the things that make for peace. But now they are hid from your eyes." Jesus knew that the people in the crowd were blinded with a false vision of success as far as God's ways are concerned.

The imagery of God's way was there but the crowds missed it. Instead of entering the city riding on a stately war horse, Jesus had chosen instead a borrowed donkey, used in those times as a lowly beast of burden. His choice of transportation was itself a repudiation of the prevailing notions of success.

A borrowed donkey. Earlier, Jesus had told several of his disciples, "Go into the little town near Jerusalem and borrow a donkey and if anyone questions you, tell them that I need it." Has it ever occurred to you that Jesus borrowed almost everything he needed. As far as we know, he owned very little. He borrowed the water he turned into wine. He borrowed the stone jars in which the wine was stored. He borrowed a boat now and then to get away. He borrowed houses in which to eat, sleep, teach and heal. He borrowed the upper room in which he ate the last supper with his friends. He was born in a borrowed manger and buried in a borrowed tomb. Maybe he was teaching us that all we have is borrowed from God. To see ourselves as borrowers is to recognize ourselves as those who

live by grace, who have no claim upon God except the one that God gives in Christ.

A king on a borrowed donkey! What kind of leader is that? A few days later when Jesus appeared before the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, it was probably with some amusement that he asked Jesus, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Pilate was no doubt thinking to himself, "you who stand before me, beaten and ragged; you who are without any evidence of rank or nobility; you who have no weapons nor army to bear them; are you the King of the Jews? Ridiculous! You are nothing but a failure." If Pilate were alive today, what would he see? Jesus never attempted to overthrow the Roman Empire by leading an armed revolution. But today the movement which Jesus began is alive and world-wide while the Roman Empire is dead.

Jesus standing before Pilate reminds me of Gandhi of India, appearing at Buckingham Palace one day for tea while he was in the midst of trying to lead India out from under the rule of the British empire and as usual in addition to being a small man, was dressed in his simple, homespun cotton loin cloth and shawl with his dollar pocket watch suspended by a safety pin from his waist. The people in power wondered what kind of leader he could be--he had no army or weapons. A reporter asked him later, "don't you think you were a

trifle underdressed for the occasion?" "His majesty," Gandhi answered, "had enough clothes on for both of us."

Pilate was right. Jesus was not a success in the way in which Rome defined that term nor was he a success in the way in which the religious authorities of his time defined that term and in the way in which we usually define that term. The usual criteria of success from the world's point of view are always of the order of appearances: power, wealth, prestige, status, fame.

In their insightful study of American life, published in the book, HABITS OF THE HEART, Robert Bellah and his colleagues observed, "The American dream is often a very private dream of being the star, the uniquely successful and admirable one, the one who stands out from the crowd of ordinary folks."

Above all to be successful in the way in which the world usually thinks of success, one has to win. Losers are rarely thought of as being successful. Certainly winning is one form of success in this world and I'm not saying it's bad to win--only that there are some things in life that cannot be judged as being successful in terms of winning or losing. We also need to remember that although winning is fun, it is not everything.

Many years ago when LaGuardia was mayor of New York City, he launched New York's City Center of Music and Drama, but he never attended the ballet there. Someone asked him why not, since he otherwise seemed to be a supporter of art. He replied, "I'm a guy who likes to keep score. With ballet, I never know who's ahead." Some of us seem to think of life only in terms of keeping score. We want to know who's ahead and who's losing.

There are some things however which do not lend themselves to keeping score. Relationships, for example, have a way of refusing to go by the numbers. That's why some people end up forsaking relationships altogether--relationships to others, to God and even with themselves. Unless they can keep score and know who is ahead, they do not even want to attned the performance.

Palm Sunday and the events of Holy Week which follow--the last supper Jesus had with his disciples on Maundy Thursday, his arrest and trial and then crucifixion on Good Friday and the Resurrection on Easter Sunday all tell us that God does not define success in the same way as we usually define it. God does not keep score in terms of winners and losers. And when there are losers in life, we tend to fine God on their side.

Recently someone asked Martin Marty what he

saw happening in the reversals, the topsy-turvy situations, the crumbling of empires and ideologies in Eastern Europe and Central America as a church historian, and from God's point of view.

Marty replied, "I don't speak for God, or know much about God's point of view, except as I get glimpses from the Scriptures. From God's point of view as seen in the Bible, the first thing one learns is that humans are not as much in control of history as we like to think we are, and that if we assume we are and write history in terms of winners and losers, we usually misinterpret history." And then Marty quoted Psalm 2:4; when nations are in turmoil, and "the peoples hatch their futile plots" and "princes conspire together," then "God that sits in the heavens laughs."

Again, from the Biblical point of view, the successful" nation according to God's standards, is one which works for justice and peace; one which protects and helps the losers in its midst; one which feeds the hungry and clothes the naked and gives shelter to the homeless. But that's not the way in which we usually think of success.

When the first space shuttle got off the ground it was a thrilling sight. The President of the United States sent a message to the space-bound

astronauts: "You go in the hand of God." That was modest enough, but he went on: "Through you today we all feel as giants again." The implication was that before this event, we had been feeling insignificant and unsuccessful as a nation. Then the President added, "Once again we feel the surge of pride that comes from knowing we are the first and we are the best."

Everyone wants to feel that they are the first and the best because then we consider ourselves successful according to the world's definition. And if we can't do it ourselves, we can always experience it vicariously through others who we consider winners and successful.

However, according to our Christian faith, winning, the quest for public acclaim and personal fame have little to do with success as far as God is concerned.

When life is viewed in light of the Gospel, it becomes clear that the best success can appear as failure and failure can prove to be true success.

Even when we fail in the eyes of other people, our loss can be gain before God. No one is a loser in God's eyes.

That's what Palm Sunday and Holy Week are all about--God coming into the world empowering the weak, healing the hurt and taking on the suffering of the world.

The cross of Christ, the center of the greatest, most enduring victory in history, looked like a horrible defeat. But from this defeat, God is still bringing forth healing and help.