

Lessons:

Matthew 21:1-11,
Matthew 26:36 - 27:54,
Psalm 22:1-21,
Psalm 118:19-29,

Isaiah 45:21-25,
Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12,
Philippians 2:5-11

On any given night pop star Britney Spears has anywhere between 30 and 45 paparazzi staking her out.

They wait outside her homes and her favorite haunts. -- They are armed with "still" cameras, "video" cameras, walkie-talkies, cell phones, satellite phones, and instant Internet uplinks.

Some of these paparazzi drive very expensive cars -- and will go to almost any length -- legal or illegal to do their jobs -- which tells you and me just how lucrative Britney's marriages, custody battles, fights with her mother, new boyfriends, Starbucks runs, and trips to the hospital can be.

To the paparazzi, Britney Spears is the most profitable celebrity today. (Atlantic Monthly, April 2008)

Take her infamous head-shaving incident at a beauty salon in Tarzana, California, in February. -- Days after, she went to her ex-husband's house in an attempt to see her children -- and frustrated when denied, she took her emotions out on a paparazzi's white, Ford Explorer -- beating it up with an umbrella while screaming swear words.

Still photographs and video of the three-minute incident sold for \$400,000.

The used Ford Explorer was put up for auction on eBay where bidding had reached \$30,000 before the owner decided to keep it.

This is why these paparazzi will work 12-14 hour shifts, seven days a week, staking out Britney.

They are awaiting that inevitable day when America's Sweetheart will drink one too many cosmos -- or pop one too many pills -- and in hot pursuit by these photographers, skid her convertible Mercedes off a cliff on Mulholland Drive -- or overdose in her living room -- finally overcome by claustrophobic feelings of being constantly stalked.

When and if this happens there will be a universal condemnation of the paparazzi.

Not unlike the days that followed Princess Diana's death -- when graffiti artists were applauded for their honorific spray-painting in public, the words "Media Overkill" -- and Diana's brother, Earl Spencer, publicly questioned media corporations for having funded the whole thing.

We will hear the loud chorus from angry voices -- we may join in the condemnation of the paparazzi and "The Media" as well.

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But in doing so, we may be conveniently forgetting, that on the day of the crisis, these photographers will have rushed back to their pricey cars -- plugged their cameras into their laptops -- and uploaded their stills and video clips onto the internet -- instantly putting them up for sale on the auction block -- where your and my favorite newspaper, magazine and television show's editors will have started the bidding.

They will use the money they made from our subscriptions -- or from the advertisements that pepper our favorite shows.

You and I will forget that the money that goes to pay for those tawdry clips and those tantalizing snaps, **ultimately came from us.**

Sure, we may not personally subscribe to those supermarket tabs -- We may even click past the reports when they come up on our favorite cable TV news shows.

But that does not make us any less guilty -- we are not so easily cleared of our culpability -- for we tacitly participate in society's injustices by simply being one of society's members.

In choosing to do nothing, we've still chosen to do something.

Palm Sunday, or Schizophrenic Sunday as it may more aptly be labeled -- marks the beginning of the end for Jesus.

You and I play our parts by waving palms in the air and rejoicing at Jesus' stellar arrival into the Holy City -- At last, He has come in true Davidic tradition -- entering the holy Jerusalem of God -- to be crowned King of Kings -- finally here to reign forever in "just rule" of all of His faithful followers!

But how little did we suspect how fickle those followers would be? -- For what begins with festive fanfare ends with a death sentence.

Adoration evaporates into abandonment

You and I join the chorus that, at the end of the day, have each one of us shouting, "Crucify Him, Crucify Him!"

Although how little we may realize the depth of our guilt in the many ways we crucify Jesus every day.

Scapegoating is what we would rather live by. -- The far more popular "blame game"

Our politicians do it, our pundits do it, our parents do it. -- They know it works. -- Nothing is ever our fault. -- It was our upbringing. -- It's the Liberals.

It's the Religious Right, bad parenting, public schools, the abortionists, the anti-abortionists, the elimination of dress codes, Bart Simpson, the ban on school prayer, the Internet, ipods, greedy CEOs, the abandonment of "traditional family values," or a host of other societal influences.

Leaving us with only the popular mantra -- "It's not my fault!"

For years, Jews got the bad rap for Jesus' death. -- Today, it's all about the Romans.

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But if Palm Sunday calls you and me to do anything, it's to fess up to what we know really happened.

Palm Sunday puts an end, once and for all, to the "blame game."

Because Palm Sunday is all about our own guilt in the constant, and endless crucifixion of Jesus.

Peter put it best when he said: "I will never desert you [Lord]."

"Then Jesus said to him, "Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times."

"Then Peter said to him," "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you."

And here's the important part: "And so said all the disciples."

Sure, we weren't there when Jesus walked into Jerusalem on that Palm-filled day -- We weren't really there when they shouted outside Pilate's terrace -- We weren't really there when they nailed him to the tree -- but as we will suggest when we sing later on in Holy Week:

"We were there when they crucified Our Lord."

And so Palm Sunday asks you and me think about all the ways that Jesus is being put to death today -- and perhaps, even, what we might do about it.

The injustices of media conglomerates who pad their bottom lines by constantly lowering the bar of tastelessness and impropriety.

The injustices of a corrections system that, for the first time in history, have more than one out of every 100 American adults behind bars (Pew Public Safety Performance Project, Feb 2008) -- this is the highest incarceration rate of any of the industrialized countries, six times more than Canada.

We think about the injustices of poverty that has put the gap between the have and have-nots at a record size -- the top 300,000 Americans collectively enjoy as much income as the bottom 150 million Americans -- so much wealth in the hands of so few people -- And these are just a few of the injustices that you and I all know surround us today.

We can all think of many, many more.

And we think, "Boy, is there any way to stand up to this?" -- Is there any way out? -- Is there any redemption?

Well sure, this is what Palm Sunday asks us to think about.

Because that's what Jesus was all about.

If this takes us a while to learn, we are not alone -- For the original 12 disciples, it came about after the crucifixion -- soon after the Resurrection.

That day came when they finally got it. -- They realized what was really going on -- The Kingdom of God had come -- something important happened at Calvary that allowed

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them, and you and me, to overcome our tendency to blame everyone but ourselves for the evil that surrounds us.

What happened at Calvary is that we learned to take the blame.

That it's ok to be guilty -- because we have been forgiven.

Calvary taught us what forgiveness is all about.

We learned what grace is all about.

We learned about what 'manning up' is all about.

We learned that there is no such thing as a bad person -- just a person who does bad things.

There is no such thing as a thief -- just a person who has stolen.

There's no such thing as a deadbeat -- just a person who seriously shunned responsibility.

Calvary brought us back the humanity that our natures are constantly trying to steal away.

Jesus taught us that none of us are to be classified by our behaviors -- made into little characters who are thus easily scapegoated.

If that were so, none of us would be blameless.

But we are all guilty -- in so many different ways -- and we are all forgiven when we accept Jesus' forgiveness -- which makes us a very peculiar people.

Dan McClendin writes that for the first one hundred years Christians were invisible to most people in the Roman Empire.

But as Christianity grew across the decades they became better known.

Do we know what they were known for?

They began to earn a reputation as an alternate and anti-social community -- They existed on the margins of the state.

These Christians, and you and I today, are a people of the periphery.

They were fanatical, seditious, obstinate, and defiant. -- Some people called them "atheists" because you couldn't see their God.

They refused to participate in Rome's cult of imperial worship that revolved around idols that you could see. -- These early believers scorned long-held Roman religious traditions.

Many of them were from the lower classes and seemed gullible.

They refused military service and met for clandestine rites rumored to include cannibalism -- because during the Eucharist they ate the body and drank the blood of Christ.

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Early Christians were also called incestuous -- It's because they called each other "brother and sister" in Christ.

And the pagans made fun of them: "You don't go to our shows," which hosted gory gladiators tearing animals and humans apart -- "You don't take part in our processions, public banquets, and sacred games!" was the criticism.

Of course not.

Christians have always preferred modesty, sobriety, and sharing -- to titillating nudity, drunkenness, and the accumulation of wealth at the expense of the poor.

And so society concluded that Christians did not understand their civic duty -- Christians did not understand what it meant to be a Roman.

Indeed, others worry today that some Christians don't understand what it means to be American.

For you and I gather today in our own act of sedition and fanatical defiance -- These palms and this cross call us to subversion not just for its own sake or to some new and improved political agenda.

It is the same agenda Christ preached, suffered, and died for. -- For society has not changed much.

It is still filled with pompous leaders who tout National exceptionalism and endless worship at the altars of self-indulgence and consumption.

We are tempted to indulge the lusts that our society tells us are "natural" and "commonly accepted" -- indeed, they are, too often, the price of admission to the "cool club." -- which is why you and I don't belong there.

You and I are tempted in the same way as every disciple who ever said "yes" to the cross -- and "no" to the world.

And as we walk together through Holy Week we will see the truth of that temptation -- and the truth of that triumph.

It's been said that some people don't come to Mass on Palm Sunday because it's such a "bummer" of a service -- "Oh it's so long, it's so dirge-y, why do we have to be so quiet?"

As you and I know, it's one of just a few times of the year when church is not about leaving here all pumped up and happy about life -- and that's done, very much, on purpose.

Mother Church, in all her wisdom, knows this well -- and throws it back in our faces, asking us: "Since when are our lives all about simply being happy?"

If coming to church is simply about a hypocritical claim to eternal bliss -- like some brainwashed zombie -- none of us want any part of it.

If our Christian faith is about anything to us, it must be about a genuineness that reflects every aspect of our lives.

Has anyone among us ever doubted God? -- (I won't ask for a show of hands)

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Has anyone here ever thought that this Christian stuff is half-myth and half-truth and really, the only reason I'm here is because my family makes me go?

Has anyone ever prayed for someone to get well -- and they died?

My friends, the emotional instability of Palm Sunday calls us to a deeper reflection on our own instabilities and imperfections as well.

It's about a cross that we made -- a cross we legalized -- and a cross that we nailed innocent people to.

We are not perfect -- This church is not perfect -- And the sooner we come clean, the better off we'll all be.

Ya, we're still guilty -- and that's what this day is all about.

But stick with Holy Week, come back as much as you can this week -- because the story's not over yet -- The last line has yet to be written -- The punch line has yet to be delivered.

As we sit in still contemplation about the things we have done and the things we have failed to do -- let us never forget that help is never far off -- our victory draweth nigh -- in our denial there is deliverance.

Amen.