

PALM SUNDAY, Mar. 25, 2018, Year B

- As long as I have known Martha, I have realized this ~ she loves **narrative**. She loves to *read and listen to stories*; and, she also loves to *tell and write* them. It was important to her as she helped raise our sons, and it has been an inescapable part of her teaching all these years. Now, it's a happy gift she shares with our grandchildren. I appreciate stories myself, and I love various examples of narrative fiction. Yet, *temperamentally*, I steer toward visual and analytical modes of communication. I find it interesting to remember that **the earliest writings in the New Testament, Paul's letters, are full of ideas and concepts, but few stories**. Yet, **our Gospel writers share the Good News with us largely in story form**. And as we know, at the heart of the Bible is **One Big Story**.
- This is why we need to start by recognizing how we live in an age absorbed with **data**, and with unconnected **bits of information**. We tend to see events in an **isolated** way, and as **separate** from others. We seem only to see **patterns among them** when we are focussed on what's gone wrong, and when we seek a cause to blame for it. Otherwise, when things are relatively well, **every event, for us, and every experience, seems to stand on its own, and has its own, unique, context and meaning**.
- Well, if that is **experientially** true (and I think it is), then today we meet with a radically different alternative. **Today**, in our Passion Gospel reading, we hear **a big story** that is comprised of numerous *interconnected* parts: Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem; his ministry in the following days; his Last Supper with his friends; his arrest, torture and trial; and then, his death. **This** is a sweeping narrative sequence, that recapitulates the history of Israel, and tells **the great story of Salvation** in miniature. **Given all this**, I share with you this morning an incredible visual **image painted by Hans Memling, around 1470**. In it, he portrays this same sweeping series of events, whose significance **shapes this whole week**. Opening ourselves to it, we find that **it will shape our whole lives**. **This is one reason why the artist depicts these**

events *in the social circumstances of his own time.*¹ Even the 'bad guys' look like *northern European*, Flemish, townsmen. The chief priest is painted as a monk, and Pilate is portrayed as a Catholic prince. *Here*, in a painting that is only about 2' by 3', Memling includes *no less than 23 scenes from the Gospel Passion narratives!*

- Though we look at this image today, please also take it home with you. *Ponder and pray over it throughout this week.* For what Memling does is exactly what all four of our Gospel writers seek to do ~ *to present the events we commemorate this week as parts of an integrated whole*, like the fibers of a *seamless garment*. Yes, a *seamless garment*, just like the tunic that Jesus wore, and which even *the soldiers* crucifying him were reluctant to split.²
- And so, Hans Memling has given us a great gift with his painting of *the Passion of Jesus*. What a reminder he has provided that *all things hold together*, even when they *don't* seem to. *Even when accidents, chaos and the forces of malice suggest otherwise, 'it all holds together.'* I remember my teaching colleague, Ralph McMichael, commenting about his lectures that, "*I can't say everything at once; but, everything I say has to do with everything else!*" Well, *for two thousand years the Church has known this to be true about every detail* within the narrative of our Lord's Passion.
- Looking at Memling's incredible painting, *we see a complex composition.* And yet, at first, *we may not recognize its many parts.* We can start, as our liturgy did this morning, with Jesus' 'triumphal' entry into the Holy City, as the great feast of Passover is about to begin. Memling portrays this entry in a very small area next to the upper left corner of the painting. *Looking closely*, you will see two people laying their cloaks in Jesus' path, and another cutting leafy branches from a tree. By this placement and the small size of the scene, the artist is *not minimizing* the event. Instead, he is indicating how this is *just the prelude* to a much bigger story, the larger

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meaning of which has yet to unfold. As Memling accurately shows, Jesus' joyful entry leads directly to *confrontation* and *conflict*. For placed just to the right of the tower and gate through which Jesus enters, we see that the painter has portrayed the 'cleansing of the Temple' scene. Notice the figure of Jesus in a purple tunic, holding a whip over his head.

- Here, *in the Temple*, the One who is hailed as Son of David, appears to *threaten* the very institution that King David first wanted to build.³ Though lauded as *a new king*, Jesus comes to *challenge* the places and people associated with *Israel's royal heritage*. And so, *right at the beginning* of the great story, we have *a strong hint of what is to come*. For all four Gospels agree that Jesus' cleansing of the Temple is the act that sets in motion the plot to kill him. Earlier, he *lamented* over the holy city, saying that he wished he could gather its people into his loving arms as a mother hen gathers her brood. But, *paradoxically*, he now enters the Temple precincts more like a blade-spurred contestant prepared for a cockfight. We see the Prince of Peace engage in an act of violence, at least against the property of those who rely upon the Temple as a *safe place* to make a living. Nevertheless, Jesus' actions in the Temple may have given hope to his followers that here, *at last*, decisive changes would be made in the land!
- Here we see an even bigger paradox, that lies at the heart of this whole week. For we would greet him with joy, *hopeful of our vindication* against those things that seem to oppose us. Yet, we find ourselves *challenged by him*. We discover how some things we hold dear, and to which we cling, become the objects of his sadness, and also of his *criticism* and scorn. We find it hard to recognize how, in Jesus, God's messianic 'rescue mission' for the world *inevitably involves conflict*. For, on one hand, we prefer the world to be arranged and function *in ways that suit us*. And yet, God intends for the world to be ordered, and to flourish *according to God's plans*. It's

hard for us to imagine that the two aspirations could be different, especially with people of good intentions, such as we are.

- So, let's remember the words of a beloved Holy Week hymn, "Ah, holy Jesus; *how hast thou offended?*" For it turns out that *we are the ones who have offended!* He, who *has done nothing wrong*, takes upon his own shoulders *the wrongs of this world*. And he carries them to a place where *they are done away with*... just as, *there, he is done away with*. He, who is something beautiful and wonderful, *becomes as nothing* so that *we, who are as nothing, can become something beautiful and wonderful like him*. The One who comes in glory, *sheds his glory*, so that we who feel *earthly shame* can partake of his heavenly glory. Or, as St Athanasius put it, 'The Son of God became the Son of Man, so that the children of people could become the children of God.' *This is the big story* of this week.
- Today, we renew 'our walk into glory.' I invite you to journey with me through the holy events we commemorate this week. Please come and worship with us on Thursday and Friday. As we do, we will be preparing ourselves. So that, when Sunday next comes, *we may with deeper joy celebrate new life, the new life that God now so freely shares with us*.



Hans Memling, *The Passion of Christ* (ca 1470)

A painting with 23 separate scenes!

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The readings appointed for this day are:

- Mark 11:1-11 and Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29, *at the Liturgy of the Palms*
and
- Isaiah 50:4-9a
- Psalm 31:9-16
- Philippians 2:5-11
- [Mark 14:1–15:47](#) (the Passion Gospel, which is traditionally read in parts)

NOTES

¹ We have seen how this same choice regarding paintings of biblical scenes has been made by numerous artists, including those of the 20th century like Stanley Spencer. This contrasts with the historically and archaeologically informed paintings of James Tissot.

² See John 19:23-24 for the significance of this reference, with regard to Jesus' clothing, which quotes the Septuagint {Greek} version of Psalm 22:18-19.

³ See 2 Samuel 7.