

Palm Sunday always has a dual focus; it is called Palm Sunday because of all the Palm waving, greeting Jesus in his triumphal entry into the Holy City Jerusalem. The season of Spring and Easter beckon us toward the promises of new life and resurrection in all things. But this Sunday is also called “Passion” Sunday because of the suffering he would experience in that final week of his life (Passion comes from a Latin root that means suffering.) His final days are often called the “Passion of Christ.”

In times of the tragedies such as war, the only kind of God that makes any sense is a God who suffers with those who suffer... not a God who fixes and controls everything, and changes the course of human events by force. I think most followers of Jesus would agree that he also never forced his Way on anyone; but he was indeed a gentle Savior, a tender Shepherd who was absolutely against violent solutions, and was more about conversion of hearts.

Regarding the conundrum about how can God be “All powerful, Everywhere present, and All Loving,” I go along with Rabbi Harold Kushner who questions the “all powerful” part. Other theologians echo this, or say something similar by describing God as a self-limiting God... the Creator God who allows *freedom* in the creation, including freedom to do evil. Another way theologians say it, is that God is a “Suffering God,” even a “Crucified God,” to borrow words from German theologian Jurgen Moltmann. Thus Jesus, in saying that he was “one with his Father” would be saying that God also suffers and is fully present in his agony and death on the cross, that it is part of the Divine Spirit of God to be a “Suffering Servant,” even giving up one’s life in Sacrificial Love.

Jesus’ sacrificial love is “redemptive” (he died *for us*), and in our world today, suffering and sacrifice can be redemptive as well. Way back to the time of the prophet Isaiah, he knew that the one to

save Israel from bondage would be a “suffering servant.” The suffering servant who would save would be one who dared to tell the truth, and “did not hide one’s face from insult and spitting,” who says: “I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled the beard.” So too with Paul, who endured much persecution and suffering and indeed wrote this morning’s letter to his Philippian church from jail.

This part of the letter to the Philippians, Chapter 2, is perhaps one of the most famous in Christian writings. It is considered to be poetry and is often called the Philippian Hymn. I would like to add a couple of other translations for you now of verses 6-7. Most of us know well the King James and **Revised Standard Version**: “Though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God something to be exploited, but *emptied himself* taking the form of a *slave*, being born in human likeness. **The Good News** version says “He always had the nature of God, but he did not think that by force he should try to remain equal with God. Instead of this, of his own free will, he *gave up all that he had*, and took the nature of a *servant*. He became like a human being. **The Message** version says: “He had equal status with God but didn’t think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human.

I love the alternate translations for this idea of self-emptying: he “emptied himself”.... Or “gave up all that he had” or in the paraphrase version, “set aside the privileges of deity;” in other words, “He did not claim special privileges.”

In a study group this week, when we were talking about this way of Christ, this way of humility and self-giving, one person mentioned Zelensky, the leader of Ukraine. While we don’t want to

take the Christ analogy too far, Zelensky surely has set aside privileges of his rank, to walk alongside the people of his country... walking around in a green shirt or green protective vest, willing to do what is needed to defend his country: “I need ammunition, not a ride.” He was offered escape and sanctuary, a privilege for his office, but he did not claim this privilege, and took on the status of a servant, to stay with his people.

It is common to use military examples or analogies when talking about a life of self-giving, of self sacrifice. Or in Jesus’ case, we have here an analogy of giving up the privileges of heaven to take on human form. I recall one revival hymn that says: “out of the ivory palaces into a world of woe.”

We think of other modern examples of giving oneself, one’s life, for commitment and loyalty to Christ and his way.... So many mentors and examples... Rev. Erv Bode, who just passed on, so faithful and eager to share the love of Christ, had such a positive spirit and good will in Jesus name. I’m sure he is now hearing the words “Well done, good and faithful servant!” Our composer friend Ken Medema, now 78 years young, obviously has given his life to the mission of Christ, through the vehicle of song! He wrote this song “Lead the Way” at about 31 years of age. The chorus is as follows: *There’s no way in this world that I can be everything that love means for me to be. But as long as morning breaks another day, Lord, I’m yours, I’ll follow, lead the way.* As Ken has done recently, we can also say, “LOVE, I’m yours, lead the way.” I’ll sing for you now this soulful song of commitment to Christ and his Way of sacrificial and redemptive love.