

A Palm Sunday Sermon

Psalm 31: 9-16

Philippians 2:5-11

Mark 15: 1-47

Exactly ten years ago I was visiting an Episcopal Church on Palm Sunday. The service had begun with the Procession of the Palms and the readings of Jesus' triumphal procession into Jerusalem, and the readings had concluded with a reading of the Passion Account of Jesus' crucifixion. The priest then went to the pulpit and began his sermon with these words: "The idea that Jesus died for our sins has caused more suffering and evil than any other idea in the history of the world!" He then proceeded to preach a sermon in which he outlined every horrible event in the history of the church—I think he talked about the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the religious wars between Catholics and Protestants, Antisemitism; I'm fairly certain he mentioned the Nazi holocaust—and he stated repeatedly throughout the sermon that all these horrible events could be traced to a single idea—that Jesus had died for the sins of the world. We then stood and said the Creed.

Without commenting on this priest's orthodoxy—which was certainly lacking—one might ask what could possibly motivate someone to make such an outrageous claim? From the pulpit no less? Well, if the priest was intending not to comment on the church's teaching but on its practice, he might well have had a point. We need to be honest that there have been plenty of times in church history when Christians have just got it wrong. One of my favorite versions of the King Arthur legend is the story of Perceval or Parzifal, the very first version of the story of the Holy Grail. Perceval is a story of redemption. The protagonist loses his faith, and, at a crucial moment in the story, is redeemed when he encounters a procession of pilgrims on Good Friday. He is dressed as a knight and they point out to him that it is not right to bear

arms on the day that Jesus Christ died. Perceval is oblivious to what day it is, and they remind him that today is "Holy Friday, the day when every one should adore the cross and weep for their sins. He who was clean from all sin saw the sins in which the whole world was bound and befouled and became a man for our sins." Perceval is moved to tears, and goes to a hermit to confess his sins. The tale ends: "Thus Perceval learned how God was crucified and died on a Friday, and on Easter Day he received the communion."