

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, Palm Sunday, March 25, 2018.

Let's give Palm Sunday a different name. Let's call it Conflicted Sunday.

Conflicted means torn between options. It can be shallow, as in "Should I go to the 8:00 o'clock service or the 10:00 o'clock service? Or it can be profound, as in "Should I grab a palm and wave it, or should I wait to see what happens?"

We're talking "profound" today. We are putting ourselves in the place of those first century Jews whose families for centuries had been promised a Messiah. This Jesus, this son of a carpenter, seemed to have the Messiah credentials. After all, he had just raised Lazarus from the dead. What greater credential was needed?

But, what if he isn't the Messiah? What if he is an imposter? What if we go to the mat for him, and he doesn't deliver? What happens to us? Maybe we should just stay back and see how things unfold.

That was their choice 2,000 years ago. And that is our choice today. And it's a tough choice. There are profound ramifications, both if he is the Messiah, and if he is not.

If he is the Messiah, you and I are in touch with the Creator. How great is that! But if he is not the Messiah, you and I look like fools. How miserable is that!

Faced with these two basic options, what do you and I do? Do we choose one or the other, or do we postpone the decision? Or, is one's life a series of decisions? Sometimes I believe, and sometimes I don't. When things are going well, it's easier to believe. When things are not going well, it's tougher to believe.

Yes, today is Conflicted Sunday.

What the palm wavers had in common with those who stayed back was that they did not know what would happen in the days and weeks ahead.

We, however, know what happened. We have a history of the following week. We know that this Jesus didn't change his behavior. He continued to irritate the authorities. We know that this Jesus had a last supper with his disciples, at which he shared that he must suffer. And we know that this was a really tough moment for those disciples. We also know that one of them would betray Jesus. And we know that Jesus would be arrested, tried, convicted and crucified. And, yes, we know that this Jesus would rise from the dead and be with his disciples for several more weeks before leaving them again, with a promise that the Holy Spirit would be with them for ever.

We know these things because the disciples, the eye-witnesses, shared their experience, a sharing that has been going on without interruption for centuries, a sharing that has brought you and me to this place today.

What we don't know with certainty is whether this sharing is about the Truth with a capital T, or whether it is about something short of the Truth. We think we know. It makes sense to us, so much sense that we offer it to others looking for the Truth.

But is it the Truth? Even those with the strongest of faith have their moments. That's why we need one another. And, by golly, here we are, together, with our palms, proclaiming our belief, moving ahead in faith, pretty strong in our individual faith, but really strong in our collective faith.

We know that the week ahead will raise all sorts of issues for us. But we also know that a week from now, we will go to the Tomb with the Marys and find it empty, just as Jesus himself had assured us. And, we know that, while we cannot touch the wounds of the Risen Christ, as Thomas did, we will have our faith confirmed in private prayer, in public worship and fellowship, in sacrificial service, in tough decision-making, and in the companionship of the Holy Spirit.

Yes, today might be Conflicted Sunday. But next Sunday will be Easter, Confirmed Sunday, Alleluia Sunday, "The Lord is Risen" Sunday.

But first things first. We have a palm. To wave or not to wave? That is the question.

And it is the question not just for today, but over time. If we say today, “No, I’m not going to wave the palm, because I’m just not sure about this Jesus,” there is tomorrow. And the choice will still be there. We can say “yes” to Jesus at any point, and he will say, “Welcome” or “Welcome back.” What he won’t say is “It’s too late. You had your chance, and you blew it.”

This constant availability of God in Christ is an under-appreciated gift. And it is a gift that is tailored to people in conflict, people like you and me. For some, religious conviction is constant. But for most of us, conviction moves up and down, forwards and backwards. Our faith might be strong one day, and weak the next. We might pray one day “Dear God, I am so grateful” and the next day “How could you, God, let this happen to me?”

Many of those who chose to welcome Jesus on Palm Sunday would deny him by the end of the week. And some of those who declined to welcome him on Palm Sunday would become his most loyal followers.

Our welcome-mat is not a given. God’s welcome-mat, on the other hand, is unconditional. The Risen Christ is always available. When the invitation is declined, God weeps, but He doesn’t stop loving us and hoping that at some point we will accept His invitation.

We must recognize, however, that each time we balk at waving the palm, at welcoming the Lord, a profound joy is delayed. Yes, Jesus is always available, but availability alone misses the whole point of Jesus. He calls us to follow, to be with Him, and, through Him, to be with His Father. That’s where we are meant to be. And that’s where true joy is to be found. Why would we keep this experience at arm’s length?

Remember this verse from this morning’s Psalm (**Psalm 31:15**): “My times are in your hand; rescue me from the hand of my enemies, and from those who persecute me.” Well, guess who one of our enemies is. We are the enemy. We are the ones saying no to the invitation. We are the ones who demand certainty before we commit, not realizing, of course, that this very demand is a stumbling block.

Yes, when it comes to religious faith, we are conflicted people. And today, Palm Sunday, is our day. To wave or not to wave. That is the question. But God's saving grace is that if we don't wave today, if we don't welcome Jesus into our lives today, we can do so tomorrow. God's welcome-mat in Christ is always out. And the joy of saying "Yes" is guaranteed. It is that guarantee that we will recognize on Easter Sunday.

There's some work to be done, though, between now and then. Welcome to Holy Week. If you thought today was a challenge, wait 'til Friday. Amen.