

**Homily, St. Andrew's
Palm/Passion Sunday, March 20, 2016
The Passion according to Luke**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

“Heard there was a secret chord; (that) David played and it pleased the Lord; but you don't really care for music, do ya?; Well it goes like this, the fourth, the fifth; the minor fall, the major lift; the baffled king composing Hallelujah... Hallelujah... Hallelujah...”

“Baby, I've been here before; Seen this room, I've walked this floor; I used to live alone before I knew ya; I saw your flag on the marble arch; Our love is not a victory march; It's a cold and it's a broken hallelujah... Hallelujah... Hallelujah...”

“Maybe there's a God above; But all I've ever learned from love; is how to shoot somebody who outdrew ya; It's not a cry that you hear at night; It's not someone who's seen the light; It's a cold and it's a broken hallelujah... Hallelujah... Hallelujah...”

These are, of course, some of the lyrics from Leonard Cohen's iconic masterpiece “Hallelujah.” It is a song of great contradiction... “Hallelujah” is a shout of praise. It's an expression of joy. But the song is full of melancholy. It speaks of love as something full of pain and betrayal with the supposed expression of joy and praise becoming cold and broken.

At the opening ceremonies of the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, k.d. lang sang “Hallelujah” as the “song of peace”. The ceremonies should have been a purely joyful celebration... that is undoubtedly how they were planned and how organizers and performers and athletes alike imagined the glorious moment as the culmination of so many years of hard work. But earlier on the day of the ceremonies, Georgian athlete Nodar Kumaritashvili died tragically in a training run on the luge track. The celebration of the opening ceremonies went on, as did the olympic luge competition, but it did so with a note of sadness as we were reminded of the fragility of life. The unexpectedness of this context made k.d. lang's performance of “Hallelujah” all the more poignant that night. In the midst of an international celebration of strength, speed and skill, k.d. lang reminded the world that “our love is not a victory march, it's a cold and it's a broken hallelujah.” It was a moment that brought together in haunting melody, joyful expectation with the sorrowful acknowledgement of brokenness. It was a moment when we were reminded just how quickly things change.

As we enter into Holy Week today, our celebration too highlights just how quickly things change. Jesus breathes his last and a centurion, perhaps one of those soldiers mocking Jesus just a moment ago, suddenly realizes: “Certainly this man was innocent.” And all the people in the crowd gathered to see a spectacle, return home, beating their breasts. It is finished. Whatever great expectations the people had when they arrived in Jerusalem for the Passover festival, they return home beating their breasts.

It has been a whirlwind, paradoxical experience of hope and despair as joyful expectation gives way so quickly to anger and contempt and leads to failure and brokenness. The people leave beating their breasts – perhaps in grief, perhaps in guilt – because just a moment ago we were calling for Jesus' crucifixion and when we got what we wanted, we mock a failed leader

who such a short time ago had arrived in the city to shouts of praise from us... part of the crowd of people lining the streets with cloaks and palm branches.

How quickly things change. Now we beat our breasts as the festival is finished and the spectacle is over, when just a moment ago we were standing at the foot of the cross, scoffing at Jesus' utter failure: "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God..." This mocking reaction of the people and the soldiers is not an uncommon one in the face of the extreme suffering of others. It is how we keep even the possibility at bay that we too could be so vulnerable. We would rather believe that human strength, ingenuity and work ethic means that we have no need of being saved, and we find safety in expressing contempt for those who do not, or who cannot, save themselves. We say things like "just pull yourself up by your bootstraps," believing that hard work will be rewarded in a fair and just way. We hold on to such beliefs as a way of denying our own vulnerability and our own mortality. We can't be too hard on that crowd of old that gathered horrified yet exultant, guilty and yet full of contempt, at the scene they themselves had created.

There is only one, a fellow accused, who sees beyond Jesus' weakness to reach out and ask: "Save yourself... and us!" Are you that one? Do you stand in need of being saved or do you feel only contempt in the face of suffering? What might it be that you need to be saved from? Perhaps you need to be saved from an overly busy schedule. Perhaps you need to be saved from the pressure of keeping up with the Jones'. Perhaps you need to be saved from unrealistic expectations in the face of challenges related to health or aging. In our intense desire, and our deep need, to be saved from whatever it is that is killing us, let us cry with that one... save us! Let us hold on to the hope that God will find a way to change the world and transform our lives – bringing rest to the weary, food to the hungry, housing to the homeless, peace to the over-wrought, justice to the oppressed, healing to the sick, and joy to the depressed. Let us look past the fear and betrayal that nailed Jesus to the cross and see the sacrificial love that chose to be there.

It is not that Jesus couldn't save himself; it is that he didn't. Jesus chose the power of vulnerability - sacrificial love - over all other forms of power. The choice had been made even before he began his public ministry in Galilee, and it was a choice that he continued to make, even through the pain of being deserted by friends and set-up by enemies. Remember back to near the beginning of the Gospel of Luke, and the beginning of lent, when Jesus was led by the Spirit of God into the wilderness where he was tempted three times. "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Use economic power to solve the problem of hunger... "all the kingdoms of the world can be yours..." Use political power to free the oppressed and bring peace to the nations. "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself" from the pinnacle of the temple and work a miracle. Use religious power to prove God's existence and God's ability to do anything. But Jesus refuses to use economic, political and religious power, choosing instead the fullness of God's power in sacrificial love. And so Jesus' triumphant entry into the city such a short time ago was not, in fact, a victory march. Jesus' love and Jesus' power turned out to be a lonely journey to the cross.

How quickly things change. One moment we are filled with the expectation of victory in economic, political and religious terms and the next moment we are shouting for crucifixion and mocking the weakness of the one we had hoped would save us. One moment we wave our palm

branches to celebrate the coming of a king, the Lord of hosts, and we shout “Hosanna in the highest”. I wonder if the people remembered those shouts of hosanna the day after the party as they dusted off their cloaks and cleaned the streets of trampled palm branches? I wonder if the shouts of hallelujah grew cold as quickly as the palm branches dried out and fell, broken, to the ground? I wonder when the people who went home beating their breasts, after the spectacle of crucifixion, finally realized that love, God’s great love, is not a victory march... It’s a cold and it’s a broken hallelujah.

The hallelujah story we live today of victory and celebration that so quickly grows cold as it breaks into pieces of betrayal, arrest, torture and death is not the end. The party may end abruptly, the palms may dry up and become, all too quickly, the ashes that remind us of the fragility of life... “Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” But then against all odds, things change quickly once again, and we find ourselves facing not the cross, but the miracle of new and transformed life on Easter Sunday next week.

Throughout this Holy Week we have the opportunity and privilege of bringing to God all our weakness, all our brokenness and all our bewilderment at the unfairness of life and death. On Thursday night we gather, with Jesus and His first disciples, as in the upper room, to wash one another’s feet in an act of service and love. On Friday morning we kneel reverently before the cross, praying that our cold and broken hallelujahs of today will once again be made whole. On Saturday night, we light a new fire, in prayer and hopefulness that God’s mission of life will once again overcome death. All of that is still to come. For today, it is enough that we simply say “Hallelujah” and remember how quickly things change.