

THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT, March 28, 2010



# Danger: Holy Week Ahead!

*a sermon by the Rev. Warren L. Pittman*

**Texts: 1 Kings 2:10-12; 3:3-14; Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58**

“Back West” in Southern California, early on in my ordained ministry, I was involved with a grassroots group that was trying to do some amateur relief and development work in and around Tijuana and Tecate, Mexico.

This was in the days when you could cross the border south of San Diego without a passport – or an armed escort!

The earliest projects of the group – which, by the way, has since evolved into a much more effective organization – were with a number of orphanages, all of which were over-populated, under-staffed, and barely resourced.

On one weekend trip we made our way out of town in a couple of vans, loaded with groceries, supplies, tools, and volunteer youth and adults, to a place run by two young nuns, where seventeen children lived.

The “orphanage” consisted of two buildings. One was the dormitory, a ramshackle warehouse-style building in which the children and the sisters lived together, and the other, a chapel.

We spent the day there, helping restock the nearly bare pantry, trying to patch up the combination dormitory-school house-dining hall, and playing with the kids.

Before we left, one of the sisters asked if we wanted to see the chapel.

We accepted her invitation, and she unlocked the other building, to show us what, by comparison to the place in which we’d just spent the day, looked like the Vatican.

We behaved ourselves, she said a prayer with us, and we thanked her for the “tour,” getting back into the vans for the trip back to Tijuana.

But almost as soon as the vans started rolling we all, in so many words, wondered aloud who had so misunderstood Jesus as to have interpreted today's Gospel verse, "*You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me,*"

...to mean, "Let the orphans sleep and eat in a drafty, cold, empty barn of a building, but make sure there is a beautiful chapel next door for me."

Since then, I have widened my appreciation of the need people have for sanctuaries in *all* the human households of faith, and the sacrifices people with so little seem so willing to make for their temple, a shrine, or a church;

... but from time to time I will still hear some "Christian" folk try to excuse the church from paying any attention to issues of human need and social justice by using this scripture!

Just to be sure we're on the same page here at All Saints, it is NOT the theology of The Episcopal Church to ignore the poor under *any* circumstances. Yes, "*You always have the poor with you,...*" which means that there is *always* work for us to do in Jesus' name.

Though the evangelist John does parenthetically tell us that Judas was anything but altruistic - pegging him from his first appearance in the Gospel as "the one who would betray" Jesus, and here adding that he was the church's first, but alas, not the last, embezzler - the motivationally questionable disciple does have a point about how much food, clothing, and shelter could be provided those in need with the bucket-load of Chanel No.5 Mary of Bethany is using on Jesus.

So it's clear the message we are *not* to hear in this morning's Gospel. What then *are* we to hear? What then, as it's written elsewhere in the New Testament, is "*...the Spirit saying to the churches*"?

Here's a big clue: this is the last Sunday before Holy Week. Next Sunday, mainly because the world makes it difficult for us to spend the whole week together at church, we have a Sunday-and-Friday commemoration that takes us from the eastern gate of Jerusalem to a hill outside the western wall, from the *Hosannas* of Palm Sunday to the God-forsaken cry of the crucified Lord.

During the days of Holy Week, other parts of the extended Passion story are heard in our worship, climaxing on Good Friday's congregational gathering at the cross.

[Let me take a commercial break here - if you have never joined in Holy Week services, talk with some of your pew-mates who have, and consider making time this year.]

What we hear this morning is a not-very subtle foreshadowing of that Holy Week. Jesus is here, as he will be in Holy Week, at supper with his friends. His feet are washed, as he will soon be washing others' feet. The intimacy of the moment is clouded by the promise of betrayal, as will the next supper - the Last Supper - about which we will hear. And this anointing will have to suffice in place of the anointing for which there will be no time for the women to provide him as the sun sets next Friday.

This story, “six days before the Passover,” we hear just before we begin the commemoration of “Christ *our* Passover ... *sacrificed for us*,” during which we are called to look upon Jesus in the moment at which we say he most fully reveals God, the moment in which he is lifted high upon the cross.

But this is *more* than a “preview” of next week; it’s more than sneak peak at Holy Week.

This Sunday’s Gospel is actually a *warning* to all would-be Christians, all “wanna-be” disciples, about the *risk* one takes in walking the Way of the Cross with Jesus.

To stand among the crowd, to cheer and wave palms of triumph is one thing, but to take a place at table with him, to let him pray for you, to let him wash your feet, and then to bystand and watch as he is betrayed, taken, misjudged, exploited, scorned, tortured and carelessly killed for the sake of a world that he loves, despite it all, is to run the risk of *falling in love with him*; and it is to run the risk in turn, like Mary, of then sacrificing and pouring out the perfume of one’s own life for the sake of “the poor”: all the others, who are indeed always with us, who are betrayed, imprisoned, oppressed, misjudged, exploited, scorned, tortured, all the others whose lives are carelessly taken from them.

Our collect, our “theme prayer” today, asks God to “*fix*” our hearts “*where true joys are to be found*.” This Gospel warns us to be careful what we pray for; because “true joy” to be only to be found in loving as God loves.

And to love God, to love Jesus is not, as Judas is said to have seen it, to forget to care for “the poor,” but to *love* them as Jesus loves them.

Yes, until the reign of God comes in all its fullness, “the poor *are* always” with us; but when God reigns among *us*, the poor will always be loved.

AMEN.