

Sermon Draft

Text: Deuteronomy 32:36–39

Sermon: Palm Sunday 2022 (Miscarriage of Justice)

Palm Sunday in recent years has come to be observed as Sunday of the Passion, one of the highest Sundays of the year and the occasion to summarize the entire passion event. Regrettably, this is due to reduced attendance at Holy Week worship; if members do not attend Maundy Thursday and Good Friday services, they might otherwise never hear the narration of Jesus' arrest, trial, crucifixion, and burial.

A courtroom is not a warm, fuzzy place. Procedure is formal and structured. First names are replaced by "Mr. Prosecutor," "the Defendant," and "Your Honor." Law, not personalities, is the basis for decision. Worst of all, when a verdict has been reached, there's the gavel slamming down and the judge's cold "Next case." Judgment in court ends even this brief, sterile relationship, which has been established over the last several hours or days.

In our text for this Palm Sunday, Sunday of Our Lord's Passion, Moses says that God will judge his people. That sounds ominous. And yet, quite unlike our familiar courtroom scene, as our holy judge, the Lord acts in such a way as to restore our relationship with him.

God's "judging" Israel is not to reach a decision but to restore their relationship with him. Our text begins, **"The Lord will judge his people"** (v 36a). Part of his last words to Israel, Moses is prophesying a terrifying future day for the nation. There would be plenty to judge. After Moses' death, Israel would often turn to foreign gods. We haven't changed that much.

The result would be devastation for the people: **"Their strength is gone and no one is left, slave or free"** (v 36c). God's judgment on Israel's idolatry would begin with the familiar courtroom scenario (vs 37–38). God sounds like any other judge: "This is the life you chose; now you see where it leads." "You made your bed; now lie in it." "You did the crime; now do the time."

In Israel, though, all legal enactments were based on the covenant relationship between God and his people. It can be summarized best in the words ***“I will . . . be your God, and you will be my people”*** (Leviticus 26:12). This is a concept of justice or judging that is unknown in other legal circles. The relationship between the victim and the criminal sometimes makes for good news, but the relationship between the judge and the criminal is seldom an interesting story. Once the gavel goes down, the judge never sees the criminal again. End of story.

Instead, God’s judging Israel was for the purpose of reestablishing their broken relationship. ***“When he sees their power (strength) is gone,”*** he will judge his people in order to have compassion on them (v 36). He puts to death and wounds, but he also brings to life and heals (v 39).

God's judging Jesus restores our relationship with him. Jesus' trial, despite reflecting everything that can go wrong with earthly court systems, also had the divine relationship of God's holy judgment behind it. There was a lot going on as far as relationships are concerned during the trial that led to Jesus' crucifixion. The immediate cause of Jesus' passion was his relationship with the Jewish leaders: they wanted to get rid of Jesus because he was disturbing their "peace" and threatening their power.

Jesus' arrest broke his relationship with his disciples: they all deserted him. Pontius Pilate's sending Jesus to Herod created a "strange bedfellows" relationship between them: they had been enemies and became friends. Pilate condemned Jesus because of his relationship with the crowd and with Caesar: since a riot was breaking out, he caved in and had Jesus condemned.

Strangely, this terrible miscarriage of justice was all part of God's holy judgment. Jesus was standing in our place. Anyone carrying our sin rightly deserved punishment, both now and eternally.

In the seventeenth century Britain's King James invented a name and a custom among royalty. The name was "whipping boy," and the custom was this. The king's son Charles was a spoiled brat. No one, however, was allowed to punish him or correct him. So the king appointed another boy, William Mayer, to be Charles's playmate and whipping boy. Whenever Charles misbehaved, William was punished. He received the whipping that Charles deserved. Seems miserably unfair, doesn't it! But in order to vindicate his people, God, the Holy Judge, had to punish someone for their sins. Incredibly, Jesus, himself the Prince who should have been above all punishment, ***"made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross!"*** (Philippians 2:7–8).

As our text reminds, it is ultimately God who judges sin. Therefore, it was really God judging Jesus, and God was perfectly holy in condemning his Son to death. Yet through it all, Jesus upheld his perfect relationship with his Father. Jesus not only lived the perfect life, but also lived perfect relationships with his Father, with his followers, and with those who condemned him. His obedience never wavered: ***“Yet not my will, but yours be done”*** (Luke 22:42).

Reading today’s Epistle in light of relationships can be enlightening. Even in being deserted by God, Jesus was still in a perfect relationship with him: ***“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*** (Matthew 27:46). Jesus’ sentence of death restores our relationship with God by cleansing us from sin and making us acceptable in God’s sight. We are free from fear of condemnation, of being permanently separated from God.

As Moses says in the text (v 39), this is what sets our God apart from all other gods. No other god acts on our behalf in this way. This can only benefit our relationships with others. Living a sanctified life is not the only goal. Living sanctified relationships is just as important.

Most judges don't care about their relationship with the criminals with whom they deal. As our Holy Judge, the Lord is different. Through his judging Jesus, the Holy Son, God has restored us to a perfect relationship with him. Though we stood condemned, we now live in sanctified relationships with him and all people.

Amen