

Palm Sunday

Passive resistance was a hallmark of the civil rights movement. Under the leadership of people like Dr. Martin Luther King, those protesting unjust laws used non-violence as an effective tool. They subjected themselves to beatings, as on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. Corrupt authorities clinging to injustice became violent and turned public opinion in favor of protestors.

This is different from letting people take advantage of you. That is just being passive. Passive resistance spotlights injustice.

St. Paul wrote to the Romans (12:14), “Bless those who persecute you.” The best example comes from Jesus. Many versions of Stations of the Cross praise his unflinching resolve under persecution, which stirs up pity for him and confronts us with the careless ways our sins offend God and neighbor.

Today’s prophecy from Isaiah tells of a similar person foreshadowing the suffering of Jesus. The final chapters of Isaiah provide words for four songs about a servant of God. We hear the last one on Good Friday every year, and the third one each year on this day, Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord. The servant sings his willingness to do what God asks: “Morning after morning” God opens his ear, and he receives a message in order “to speak to the weary a word that will rouse them.” You’d think everyone would love such a person. But for reasons that are unclear, this servant meets opposition, even physical, personal violence. He sings about his passive resistance: “I gave my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who plucked my beard; my face I did not shield from buffets and spitting.” His approach does not stop the beatings, but it turns public opinion away from his corrupt aggressor. He concludes, “The Lord God is my help, therefore I am not disgraced. I have set my face like flint, knowing that I shall not be put to shame.”

As we learned painfully in the civil rights movement, people become violent when they stop thinking clearly. Dialogue is stimulating, but it demands a willingness to receive criticism, reconsider strongly held beliefs, and even change one’s way of thinking. When people let their authority overpower their reason, it’s hard for them to stay peaceful; it’s easier to get angry, even at people they love.

When someone gets angry and violent, we may want to retaliate the same way. The suffering servant of Isaiah shows a different approach. Don’t fight the same way. That only stokes more violence. Choose a peaceful response that reveals how corrupt the other person is. But be prepared for hurt. The one who wins an argument is not the one who suffers least, but the one who does God’s will morning after morning. That one shall not be put to shame.