

## **PLAY'S THE THING Palm/Passion Sunday**

*“The play’s the thing wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king.”* (Shakespeare, Hamlet, end of Act 2) The setting: Hamlet’s uncle has taken over the throne of Denmark after Hamlet’s father has died. Hamlet suspects the usurper of having murdered his father. He hopes through the device of a play by enacting a drama similar to the suspected poisoning of his father to catch his Uncle in a guilty reaction and thus prove that he is the murderer.

We’ve just participated in a play that might very well catch our conscience. The dramatic reading of the Passion Gospel is a play where we claim the role of murderers. *“Crucify him! Crucify him!”* we shout. We participated in Jesus’ death. Indeed the very point of this drama is to draw us into it and catch us up. If someone were trying to find out our guilt in Jesus’ death, this would be the play to do it.

*“Play”* may be one of the most flexible words in the English language. In my abridged Webster’s Dictionary there are 48 separate meanings or variants to the meaning of the word. As a verb we *play* an instrument. Drama is *play*. Sports are *play*. Children’s games and make-believe are *play*. Participating in any game is *play*. Gambling is *play*. *Play* can be a battle with swords or words. The action of reeling in a fish so as to tire it out and bring it to net is *play*. A drama is a *play*. When you have a little extra turn in your steering wheel before it engages is *play*.

For someone who isn’t a native speaker the word must seem to have an awful lot of different meanings. And yet, as flexible as the word *play* is, there is still a kind of unity or coherence to its meaning. In all its meanings there’s something *fun* about *play*. *Play* is after all... *playful*. It’s an activity that one enjoys doing. *Play* is imaginative. *Play* engages us at a different level than *work* or *study* or *rationality*. *Play* is not meant to be *productive*. *Play* engages our hearts as much or more than it engages our minds.

At its very best, liturgy is *play*. Worship is meant to engage us at a deeper level than our rational, productive minds. Worship is meant to be imaginative, to engage our whole being and to be fully participatory.

- Participating in the Passion Gospel, especially if we let it bring us into the action – the betrayal, the sorrow, the brutality and the pain – of Jesus’ passion... is *play*.
- Waving our palm branches and walking around the block while proclaiming glad *hosanna’s* is *play*.
- Walking from station of the cross to station of the cross, feeling the weight of that cross upon Jesus’ shoulders, the pain he carried for the whole world getting heavier and heavier is a kind of *play*.
- Having our feet washed on Maundy Thursday or washing one another’s feet is *play*.
- Stripping the altar bare and walking silently away from the darkened church is a kind of *play*.

- Walking up to the cross on Good Friday, kneeling in front of it, touching it, picturing Jesus hanging there in agony, imagining the weight of our own burdens dropping from our backs as we stand beneath it... is *play*.
- Lighting our little candles to shine in the darkness at the Easter Vigil is *play*.
- Marveling at stories of God's power and might is *play*.
- Being splashed with the baptismal water to remind us of our own new birth is *play*.
- Joyfully ringing our hand bells to the good news that Jesus is risen from the grave is *play*.

All the Holy Week services are full of playful reenactment. They are meant to engage our whole beings and not just our minds. We're meant to *participate* and be fully *engaged* in them and not just to be passive observers.

The Connecticut lottery advertises that *you can't win if you don't play*. We might well advertise our Holy Week services that you won't be touched as deeply as you can by the drama of Jesus' death and resurrection unless you participate in it through these Holy Week services of reenactment. If you do, if you let your imagination, your senses, your body be engaged, then you will come to the cross, the grave, the empty tomb and a bright shining man you first suppose to be the gardener and realize with a heartfelt joy the gift God has given you. If you do you might be surprised at the way the Passion story affects you.

Hamlet's play about the intrigue of a sneaky murder by poisoning had the desired effect. His uncle the king reacted plenty guiltily. Hamlet had his proof. Much like the prophet Nathan who tripped up King David long, long ago by telling him the story of a rich man with many flocks and herds who stole a poor man's one pet ewe. David was indignant at the injustice only to have the story applied to himself and Bathsheba. *The play's the thing, wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king*.

How might this story trip us up, how might it catch us unawares? How might it show our hidden guilt or remind us more deeply of God's love? The purpose of these dramas is not to judge or condemn us, but rather to set us free. The purpose is to let the power of all that Jesus did for us by taking our part, by surrendering his life, by suffering and dying on our behalf – to let all that – take hold of us in a new way. To let the power of Jesus' passion shape and mold us more fully, more deeply into Christ's pattern of love. Participating in Holy Week is an opportunity to let the story at the very heart of our faith engage us more deeply. So, as we enter into these Holy Week worship services of reenactment, let's *play*.