

The Triumphal Entry

preached by Rev. Paul Sakasov on April 14, 2019

Luke 19:28-40

28 After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. 29 When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, 30 saying, ‘Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. 31 If anyone asks you, “Why are you untying it?” just say this: “The Lord needs it.” ’ 32 So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. 33 As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, ‘Why are you untying the colt?’ 34 They said, ‘The Lord needs it.’ 35 Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. 36 As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. 37 As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, 38 saying, ‘Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!’ 39 Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, order your disciples to stop.’ 40 He answered, ‘I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.’

This morning as we celebrate Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, I would like to begin with some commentary on today’s gospel reading and the tradition of Palm Sunday before exploring what this story says to us today and how we might apply it to our lives.

Starting with some textual commentary, in Luke’s telling of the story, Jesus has just healed a blind man, and then dined at the house of a chief tax collector named Zacchaeus before he entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. While these details may seem to be nothing more than a retelling of the events that happened, it is important to dwell on their significance to the larger story that is being told. For Luke, like the other gospel writers, does not just tell us what happened in order that we might know what happened; he tells stories to make a point.

So, in his gospel, Luke tells the story of Jesus healing a blind man and then going over to Zacchaeus’s house before he enters Jerusalem. In John’s gospel the emphasis is on Lazarus who has been raised from the dead. And what’s the point that Luke wants to make? In Luke’s gospel, the point is to emphasize the counter intuitive ways of the kingdom of God as a set up to Palm Sunday. This goal is

achieved by contrasting the response of two outcasts, a blind man and a tax collector, to that of the religious elite.

In the case of the blind man and the tax collector, we see from the story that they both recognized Jesus as God's promised Messiah, even though they were the last people whom anyone would expect to recognize the presence or work of God in their midst. On the other hand, the people who had devoted their lives to learning the law and practicing religion were completely blind to what God was doing. For not only did the Pharisees think that Jesus was God's enemy, they thought they were doing God a favour by trying to get rid of him. Now, who would have thought things would turn out this way when the Messiah came to his people?

That being said, while the Pharisees did not recognize Jesus for who he was, they most certainly understood what he was communicating. In other words, they did not believe that Jesus was the long awaited Saviour that God promised to send, but, they knew without a doubt that this was who he was claiming to be. His actions in today's reading made that more than clear to the Pharisees and everyone else who was there.

As we read, Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a colt, which Matthew tells us was the offspring of a donkey. This he did to fulfill the words of the prophet Zechariah who wrote, "See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." As an aside, in those days, a king came riding upon a horse when he was bent on war and rode upon a donkey when he wanted to point out he was coming in peace. This means that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem symbolized his entry as the Prince of Peace, not as a war-waging king.

Also worthy of note, in many lands in the ancient Near East, it was customary to cover the path of someone thought worthy of the highest honour. In all four gospels we find Jesus receiving this kind of honour as he entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke's gospel, we are told the crowd placed their clothes and freshly cut tree branches in his path. In John's gospel, we learn that the branches that were waved and placed on the street underneath Jesus came from palm trees.

While Luke does not include this detail in his account of the gospel, it is still worth taking the time to comment that in the Jewish tradition, the palm branch was used in ceremonial acts of rejoicing. It was also a symbol of triumph and victory

in the Roman world and it was a symbol of eternal life that Egyptians used in their funeral processions. Given these powerful images that the palm branch embodied it is no wonder that the elders of the ancient church decided to call the Sunday before Christ's resurrection, "Palm Sunday."

One further comment on the Palm branch. In Revelation, chapter seven, the white-clad multitude standing before Jesus in heavens' throne room are holding palm branches and shouting, "salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb." Incidentally, this scene from Revelation bears a resemblance to the Palm Sunday story as the people cried "Hosanna," which means, "save." Again, Luke does not use this famous cry in his account of the triumphal entry, but, he includes the other words from Psalm one hundred and eighteen that the crowds sang as Jesus entered Jerusalem. These words are, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord."

A final textual observation that I would like to make before asking what this story means for us today is that Jesus began his entry into Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. As our ancient creeds tell us, from this beginning point Jesus would descend into Jerusalem, where he would go to the cross, then to the grave, then to the depths of hell. From there he would rise from the grave, and then, forty days after his resurrection, he would ascend into heaven from the Mount of Olives. Notice how everything here comes full circle, as it does in so many other places in Scripture.

Putting all of this together, in the story of Palm Sunday we are witnesses to Jesus Christ, God's anointed king, who comes in peace, who comes to save, who comes in victory, to bring eternal life, and to lead us to a place of joy. Given all these good things that are bundled into one story, it is no wonder that Palm Sunday is seen as a day of celebration.

However, as we consider these things, the story of the triumphal entry also has a dark side. For Jesus did not come to Jerusalem to receive a crown of gold but a crown of thorns. Jesus did not come for a proper coronation, but rather a crucifixion.

In other words, there is no triumph here, as we would think of it, only tragedy. While Jesus' disciples and a couple of outcasts welcomed him as king, the religious authorities rejected him and the general population ignored him. While the dawn of a new age had come and the king had arrived in glory, most were too caught up in the busyness of their daily routine to notice. The same could be said

for our world today.

For the presence of Christ is as real today as it was back then, but, who has time to notice? There are other more pressing matters to attend to; or so we think. The income tax forms need to be filled out. Our houses need to be cleaned. We have to take our children to the next sporting event, and the list goes on. All the while, Jesus is in our midst, but we can't see him, because we are not looking. Our king has come, our salvation has come and we have missed it.

While the situation may seem hopeless at times, the good news is that Christ has come to give sight to the blind. Christ has come to restore those like Zacchaeus, who are enslaved to money and pleasure. Christ has come to conquer the works of legalism and dead religion. Christ has come to save the world from all the brokenness that weighs it down.

As Christ performs this great work of salvation, our calling is to be alert to the presence of God in our midst and to make others aware, that the king has come and our salvation is at hand. While there are many ways that we do this, in the season of Lent we strive to increase our sensitivity to God in our midst through prayer (which represents justice towards God), fasting (which represents justice towards one's self), and almsgiving (which represents justice towards one's neighbour).

So today as we enter the final week of Lent, known as Holy Week, may we not tire in our vigilance. And as we partake in the holy liturgies, as we celebrate communion together, as we continue to spend time in prayer, as we continue to exercise self discipline in what we eat, and in what we do, through all these things; may we hear the voice of the Spirit whispering the good news of our salvation. May we notice the presence of our king who comes to us in peace, riding on a donkey, to claim his throne. And like the disciples of his day, and the faithful through out the ages, may we honour him with our worship and with our praise. May we be found calling out like the crowds at the triumphal entry, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!