

Palm Sunday – Dav Timm

Palm Sunday is the last Sunday in the season of Lent, before we enter Holy Week when we remember the last days of Jesus' life. It is a jubilant beginning to a week that ends in tragedy, before we begin anew with the resurrection on Easter.

The event we heard about in our Gospel text today is mentioned in all four gospels, but Matthew's is the only one to mention Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey and the donkey's colt. Now, how Jesus managed to ride two animals at the same time, I'm not sure, but this is Jesus we're talking about, so I wouldn't put it past him. What's important to recognize is the complete humility Jesus assumed as he made his triumphal entry into the holy city. Although his entry certainly symbolized his messianic royalty, it also showed the crowd of people that he was just as human as them: he didn't ride into town on the back of a mighty steed after all, but on the simple colt of a donkey.

Our reading from Philippians echoes the actions of Jesus we see in Matthew. When Jesus rode into Jerusalem that day, he was not trying to equate himself with God by exploiting his divinity, but rather, to show the people that he comes in peace. Paul tells the church at Philippi to imitate the attitude of Christ, who took the form of a slave and humbled himself in obedience to God. Likewise, we should not seek recognition for our efforts to serve, but we should offer ourselves as sacrifices, just as Jesus did.

Similarly, the Old Testament lesson from Isaiah depicts a related theme of humility. The prophet allowed his enemies to insult and attack him, but he did not fight back. With the help of God, we can face any adversary, and in his sight we will not be declared guilty or disgraced.

So far, our four scripture lessons teach us to humble ourselves in grateful obedience to God. But we've heard this before, haven't we? I don't mean to be lazy, but it just sounds like so many other Bible lessons. So I'm going to dig a little deeper in hopes of finding something a bit more challenging.

The story of the triumphal entry bears much significance when considered from a cultural and historical standpoint. First of all, the custom of waving palm branches is by no means original to this Bible story. It has been widely practiced in other cultures and religions, including Roman paganism. Occasionally the Roman governor would process into the city and demand the worship of the people as acknowledgement of the state religion, and the people would wave palm branches to show their observance. The Jews were not exempt from this ritual, as they were required to take part in order to practice their Passover celebration freely. While the governor passed by they would shout "Hosanna," an Aramaic word that means "Save!" In doing this, they were quite possibly bluffing to the Roman officials, pretending that they were worshipping the pagan idols by shouting a foreign word, while simultaneously mocking the pagan ritual.

We can't be sure if Jesus knew the crowd would be there to welcome him that day, but I suggest that he recognized the irony of his entry into the city following the Roman governor. What sets Jesus' entry apart, however, is the fact that the Jews really were shouting "Hosanna" with utmost sincerity. While the Jews mocked the pagan traditions, they carried the joke further by really worshipping Jesus, riding in like a king, on a donkey.

To suggest that Jesus' actions here were not political and subversive would be naïve. Indeed, the very next passage tells of Jesus entering the temple, overturning the money tables, and healing the blind and the lame. He goes on to preach a sermon directed at the chief priests and teachers of the law, saying: "I tell you the truth: the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you." Meanwhile, the children in the temple area shout, "Hosanna!" Now Jesus has not only made a mockery of the Roman government and civic religion, but of the temple priests as well.

Jesus' entry into the city is usually considered to have taken place about a week before his death. Christ is fulfilling Old Testament prophecies and the people are hailing him as the King of Peace, but aren't these some of the same people who will soon give in to political pressure, betray him and turn him over to be crucified? We surely can't blame them entirely for his death, but this event demonstrates just how much Palm Sunday has to do with the crucifixion. Without faith enough to follow our Lord to the cross, wouldn't we also betray him?

I believe the lesson to be learned today is not just to worship the king with singing and palms waving. But I hope these palms also serve as a symbol and reminder to worship with the palms of our hands, following Jesus' example of healing the sick and ministering to the poor and outcast. We must humble ourselves in obedience to God, even to the point of death.

As we enter this Holy Week before Easter, let us not forget the Passion of Jesus as he humbly took the form of a slave and faithfully obeyed God's commands, even when it meant death on a cross. Let us follow his example and humble ourselves, even when it means facing insults and spit in our faces, and yes, even death. But let us also anticipate the resurrection, when Jesus at last takes advantage of his divinity and returns. By laying down his life and rising from the dead, Jesus upset the natural order of everything. May we also not be afraid to do the same, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.