

The Story Behind Palm Sunday

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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Near the end of the Lord's ministry in Galilee, we read in Luke, chapter 9, "Now it came to pass, when the time had come for Him to be received up, that He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem" (v. 51). Then follow many stories of healing and parables on his slow descent into the region of Judea, approaching from the east side of the Jordan River, crossing over at Jericho and then resting at Bethany on the Mount of Olives before entering the city.

There, as you heard in our first lesson, He instructed His disciples to fetch a donkey so that He could ride down the slopes and across a little brook, climbing again up the steep hill to Jerusalem. We are all familiar with what happened next on the day we call Palm Sunday: a great crowd of people gathered with the disciples to welcome Him, laying their garments, palms and other leafy branches in His path and shouting praises to His name as He entered the gates of the city. Our hymns today reflect this great celebration.

But then what happened? And what was the Lord Himself thinking?

Our first clue, perhaps, appears in the Gospel of Luke where in the context of this great celebration we read, "Now as He drew near, He saw the city and wept over it, saying, 'If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side, and level you, and your children within you, to the ground; and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not know the time of your visitation'" (Luke 19:41-44).

In other words, the Lord was profoundly sad. He knew His crucifixion was imminent; He had warned His disciples about this on at least four occasions. And now, approaching the time when He would be betrayed, He observed the sorry state of the whole city and prepared for the worst. Indeed, in Mark's Gospel we read that having come into the temple, "when He had looked around at all things, as the hour was already late, He went out [again] to Bethany with the twelve" (Mark 11:11). Symbolically the lateness of the hour clearly represents the approaching end of the Lord's life on earth, and the return to Bethany on the Mount of Olives one final opportunity to steel Himself for what lay ahead. In fact the Mount of Olives represents an elevated state of love and compassion for the people from which He could view the city and reflect on what He needed to do next.

But before we go any further let's remember that the Lord's whole life was represented in the stories of the Old Testament, and that King David in particular represented the Lord as to the Divine truth fighting and overcoming the evils and falsities of human heredity to establish His kingdom. So, unsurprisingly, there is another sad story in 2nd Samuel about David fleeing Jerusalem and *going up to the Mount of Olives* when he was being threatened by His treasonous son, Absalom. And "he wept as he went up; and he had his head covered and went barefoot" (2 Sam 15:30). It may not seem a very close parallel, but think about it: the whole city was under the corrupt influence of Absalom and his counselor, Ahithophel. It was a sad and difficult time, rather like the state of things when the Lord Himself left Jerusalem with His disciples to regroup on the Mount of Olives, knowing that He would soon be facing an angry mob misled by all the hypocrites in the city.

David needed a plan to overcome this evil. So he sent a spy named Hushai back into the city to counter the advice of Ahithophel and mislead Absalom, setting the stage for the battle against him. And guess what! – the name, Hushai, means *quick*, recalling the Lord’s words to Judas on the eve of His betrayal when He said, “What you do, do quickly” (John 13:27). And the name, Ahithophel, means *foolish brother*, recalling Judas himself, or Peter, or any of the disciples whom the Lord in His resurrection called “foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken” (Luke 24:25).

The whole story reminds us of the urgency of the situation facing the Lord in the last week of His life. For that matter, the incident with Absalom was also near the end of David’s life. And of course we know that David did overcome the insurrection against Him, even as the Lord overcame the corruption of the whole religion that He found so desperately depraved. But it wasn’t easy, and if we think of the people in Jerusalem as members of the Lord’s own family whom He wished to save and protect, but who had rebelled against Him, we can feel His grief as the grief David experienced having to confront his own son. Remember, he asked his commanders to “deal gently for my sake with the young man, Absalom” (2 Sam. 18:5), even as the Lord on the cross said, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

The similarities between these two stories are hardly coincidental. Rather they illustrate the fact that the Lord’s whole life was a fulfillment of the things represented in the Old Testament – the Word, in effect, “made flesh.” And they remind us, too, that just about everything the Lord ever said or did was rooted in some direct reference to that Word.

And so, we read, “they came to Jerusalem.” And as they drew near they found a fig tree, and being hungry the Lord approached it seeking fruit. But finding only leaves and *no fruit* He declared that no one would ever eat fruit from it again (Mark 11:12-14), and with that the tree shriveled up and died overnight. This is particularly significant because that tree represented the state of religion in Jerusalem at the time, namely, all leaves and no fruit. Leaves represent knowledge and fruits represent good works. And do you know? – this, too, is a direct reference to something Jeremiah said some 600 years earlier when, condemning the Jews for their idolatry and covetousness, he declared, “‘I will surely consume them,’ says the Lord. ‘No grapes shall be on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree, and the leaf shall fade; and the things I have given them shall pass away from them’” (Jer. 8:13).

It may seem strange that the Gospel writers “admit” that it was not the season for figs when the Lord cursed the tree. But after 600 years He had given the people plenty of time to get it right, and now the time was up. It was clear that there would never BE a season for figs among them.

And so “Jesus went into the temple and began to drive out those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. And He would not allow anyone to carry wares through the temple. Then He taught, saying to them, ‘Is it not written, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations”? But you have made it a “den of thieves” ’” (Mark 11:15-17).

To drive out those who bought and sold, and to upset the tables of the money-changers and those who sold doves in the temple is, in effect, to fulfill the work of all the prophets from Isaiah to Malachi, for they, too, had railed against the abuses perpetrated by the people in Jerusalem, but for the most part representatively, without power to overcome them. Now the Lord in His own

Divine Humanity was confronting them directly, and throwing them out at last.

The original Greek speaks of selling first, and then buying, which brings to mind the expression, “selling a bill of goods,” or convincing someone of a lie, the point being that the priests in the temple were using what they found in the Word to enrich themselves at other people’s expense. To “buy” is to acquire or procure for one’s self, and so to appropriate something to one’s self. Thus they took credit for what was the Lord’s alone and used it to control and manipulate others. The money-changers specifically represent those who deal in spiritual wealth, which is knowledge, and dove merchants represent those who deal in the affections for truth. By controlling the exchange rate for people who came to offer sacrifices these profiteers were in the perfect position to take advantage of them, but the material abuse was nothing compared to the corresponding spiritual abuse, which was to impose falsities on them as if they were true. Similarly, selling doves is taking advantage of people’s affections, trading on their innocence, that is, their willingness to believe in and give credit to those who claim Divine authority.

Sadly, we have the same situation in the Christian world today, where priests and pastors – who in turn are often misled by others from whom they learn – continue to perpetuate really wrong ideas about the Lord, the Word and spiritual life, claiming Biblical authority for what they say when really they are only giving their own interpretation, “teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Isaiah 29:13) – for example the whole misguided concept of an angry god being pleased with the vicarious sacrificial atonement of his own son to absolve the human race of any responsibility for sin. The difference in the situation today is that the Lord Himself has now explained what is true and false so that any of us who have a desire to know can go to the Word in the light of the spiritual sense and see it for ourselves – to see, for example, that God is pure love and never angry, but willing to take on a natural human form in order to confront the evils of the day, teaching and leading people away from sin.

In our lesson the Gospel refers to the Lord overturning the *tables* of these merchants and the *seats* of those who sold doves. It also mentioned that He would not allow anyone to carry wares through the temple, the word, wares, being a loose translation of the Greek for vessels, that is, containers. These little words may not seem to have much significance, but they are reminders of the real states of mind of those people. A table in general serves as a platform for presenting whatever is placed on it, whether books, for example, or a lamp, or food. As such it represents those things, and in particular a settled state of those things in a person’s mind. It is similar with seats: a person takes a seat when he wants to rest, and so this, too, represents a settled state of mind. The Lord would not condemn anybody for having doubts or questions about spiritual things, but when we have made up our minds and are comfortable in a disorderly life, *when that is what we have chosen for ourselves*, and we sit as the Psalmist said “in the seat of the scornful” (Ps. 1:1), then a judgment is both useful and necessary.

We can only imagine the shouting and chaos that must have ensued when the Lord came through and did these things, completely disrupting the patterns of abuse. But now, what about the shouting and chaos we experience as the Lord confronts established patterns of selfish, controlling behavior among ourselves? Can we do better than the scribes and Pharisees of that day, who so completely resented the Lord that their only thought was how to get rid of Him? There is, of course, a holy temple in our own minds, a sacred place we call our own, where our considered thoughts and feelings rest undisturbed. How dare the Lord mess with this proprietary space? Why can’t He just leave us to think what we want and get whatever benefit we can from our own

self-centered feelings?

Of course the answer is that it's not right, and it's hurtful to ourselves and others. We may suppose that what goes on in the inner workings of our own minds can do no harm and isn't anybody else's business, but in fact it IS a business that pre-occupies us *and* affects everyone around us, whether we realize it or not. Indeed, the vessels or containers that the Lord would not allow to be carried through the temple represent the thoughts and ideas (the knowledge and concepts) that we carry around to justify and support our intentions – in this case our selfish intentions. And what the Lord is saying to *us* in this injunction is that we have to let go of these ideas, or as we might say today, get rid of the baggage of self-centered ideas and concepts we carry around, making us feel superior to others, willing and happy to take advantage of them.

In particular we have to keep these ideas from corrupting the truths of the Word represented by the temple in Jerusalem. As the Lord said, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it a 'den of thieves.'" This of course is a direct reference to a prophecy of Jeremiah when he was told to go and stand in the gate of the temple and blast the people not only for all the corruption in it but for their *excuses* in that they claimed they were driven to it (Jer. 7:10-11). And oh, my! How familiar this sounds when we really think about it, as we often say of our inappropriate thoughts and actions that we were *provoked by someone else*, or that we *couldn't help ourselves* because of this or that situation. Nonsense. We may not have a lot of self-control, but with the Lord's help we can keep the hells from invading our minds and perverting the truths of His Word in us.

It's the difference between a "house of prayer" and a "den of thieves" – literally a *grotto, cave or pit* of thieves, which brings to mind the word, pity, as in self-pity and self-justification. The simple truth is that if we want to have a life of integrity we need to turn to the Lord inwardly in prayer and *ask for His help*. When we go to the Word with the idea of finding there what we need to make us feel OK about ourselves and comfortable with our preconceived ideas, we are really taking what is Divine, claiming it as our own, and re-shaping it to suit ourselves. This is spiritual theft and it doesn't help anybody, least of all ourselves.

As the events of Palm Sunday drew to a close in old Jerusalem the religious leaders who had endorsed all this opportunism began seriously to plot how they could destroy the Lord and rid themselves of this intrusion into their world. And so the stage was set for the final week of His life, a week that would find Him in the temple daily, teaching, healing, preparing for His death, resurrection and the beginning of the Christian Church. On average by the number of chapters in the four Gospels a full 32% of all that is written about the Lord takes place during this one week. And it's all – literally all – about the importance of charity and good works as the ultimate expressions of respect for Him.

Let's think about this. Let's reflect a little on what's going on in the temple of our minds this week. Let's commit to a new beginning without subverting, denying or objecting to the teachings the Lord has given us for our own good. And let's remember, because He lives we can live also, and receive the life He intends for us in heaven and on this earth.

Amen.

Lessons: *Mark 11:1-19, Psalm 118:14-29, and Doctrine of the Lord #1 & 8*