

Palm Sunday
Foresight & Providence: the Fulfillment of Prophecy

A sermon by the Rev. Michael Gladish
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One of the fundamental principles of Divine Providence is that the Lord knows the hearts of all people. He knows us and He works with us, respecting our freedom but at the same time anticipating every move we make, even every thought we think. He can do this because all our thoughts are tied to our affections, and He knows what we love.

This is nowhere shown more clearly than in the events leading up to the crucifixion. Even before what we call Palm Sunday, or the Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, He had on three separate occasions predicted His death on the cross and His resurrection. The first was while He was "in the region of Caesarea Philippi" (Matt. 16:13), near the ancient city of Dan, some 30 miles north of the Sea of Galilee, where He was having a conversation with Peter about the keys of the kingdom of heaven. The second was "while they were staying in Galilee" (Matt. 17:22) on the way down to Capernaum after His transfiguration. And the third was while they were on the way, "going up to Jerusalem" (Matt. 20:17) before they had arrived at Jericho, some 12 or 13 miles east of Jerusalem. By the way, overall, the journey from north to south was no less than 100 miles and must have taken at least 5 days. So we're talking about the Lord knowing things having to do with people who were a long way away.

No less remarkable in all this was the Lord's prediction of what would happen with regard to the procurement of the colt, or donkey, for Him to ride into Jerusalem. And this in turn is reminiscent of His prediction about the upper room where the disciples had their last supper with Him, and His prediction that they would find the money to pay tribute to Caesar in a fish's mouth: He told them all these things well ahead of time, and everything went *exactly* as He had said.

Thinking about these things, naturally one of the questions that will arise is whether it was all being *orchestrated* by the Lord or simply *anticipated* by Him. Were these events in effect inevitable, or given human free will might they possibly have gone a different way?

Sometimes the Gospels seem to suggest that things *might* have gone differently, for example, when Peter vehemently argued that he would NEVER betray the Lord – and yet he did, just as the Lord predicted. Sometimes also you get the definite impression that the Lord was provoking people, calling them out for their hypocrisy and so encouraging them to react – forcing the issue, as we say. Indeed, when the Writings tell us that the Lord came to fulfill all things of the Word, we may wonder if there was any other way this could be done, or whether the script for His life was written in such a way that it could NOT have been any different.

Let's look at this last concept first. Matthew's Gospel specifically ties the events of Palm Sunday to prophecies that occurred in the Psalms and Zechariah hundreds of years before He was born. Other things the Lord did throughout His life were also tied to hundreds of other things prophesied throughout the Word. Does this mean these events were inevitable, or were the prophecies mentioned only because they came true? Well, from a merely human perspective it looks as if the Lord was not in real freedom, but was simply doing what the script (Scripture) required. But bear in mind that the Lord's glorification was a gradual process and that by the time of His public ministry, and especially the last week or so of it, He was approaching a com-

pletely timeless, Divine understanding of everything in His life. That said, the truth of the matter is that *He was doing exactly what He had in His infinite love and wisdom set out to do hundreds, even thousands of years before, when the prophecies were written.* And it was becoming increasingly *obvious* to Him not only *what* must be done but also how quickly, as His glorification progressed. In that light He couldn't "change His mind" and do something different because anything different would have been inconsistent with that perfect, timeless plan.

Viewed in this way we can see that the Lord was simply following through on what He had known for centuries – perhaps from the beginning of time – would be necessary for the salvation of the human race. And of course He didn't compel anyone else to act out a script, either, He just *knew* what they would do given the inclinations of their hearts. He knew it from the beginning of time because He could see the trajectory of deteriorating states from the very first errors.

Note, by the way, that any individual at any given time with heaven's help still could have been saved, and there can be no doubt that many were saved before the Lord came into the world. But when this had become so difficult as to be almost impossible due to the growing confusion in the spiritual world, the Lord stepped in – again, not forcing anyone to do anything, but providing the way out of that mess (in fact "the Way, the Truth and the Life") if people **would** choose to follow Him.

So with all this as background, let's look again at the Palm Sunday Story. What was the Lord now doing that He had known all along He would need to do?

First of all, on the Mount of Olives, He called for a donkey, and told two of His disciples exactly how and where to find it. Now we know that this sure-footed, sometimes stubborn beast of burden represents the human faculty of reason – the ability to think logically and draw conclusions about the things we learn. Judges and kings, we read, in ancient times typically rode on donkeys to their installations in a symbolic gesture of their responsibility to consider and uphold the law.

This, above all, was what the Lord had come to do. As He said, "For judgment I have come into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may be made blind" (John 9:39). This is why He so often spoke of Himself as the light of the world, and why at the end of his life He said, "For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth" (John 18:37).

Next in the course of events the multitudes cast their garments and leafy branches of palms trees on His path. Considering the hilly path from the Mount of Olives down into the Kidron Valley, and the slope up again to Jerusalem, you might think this would make the way slippery, risking a fall. But we have to presume that all care was taken, as these gestures represent the respect that they were showing the Lord, specifically the respect for His wisdom over their own, the leaves and garments that they threw down corresponding to their own ideas of the truth cast down in deference to Him.

Now this is interesting, because in the end we know that they were NOT willing to subordinate their ideas to Him, since they all abandoned Him in favor of Barabbas, a truly dangerous man. But remember, these actions represented the truth that all of our ideas ARE subject to the Lord whether we like it or not, *whether we think they are or not.* So in acting out this drama the people were expressing something much deeper and more meaningful than they could possibly have

known. In fact, the Lord's will *would be* done, He *would* be glorified, and His wisdom *would* prevail over their ideas of the truth, enlightening them and showing all of us the way to salvation and eternal life.

Still, it was not a happy day for the Lord! Luke's Gospel (19:41-41) tells us that as Jesus approached Jerusalem, "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.'" And then He predicted the destruction of the whole city, even including the children in it so that "not one stone would be left upon another."

This, of course, was highly and obviously symbolic. Apart from the fact that Jerusalem was the center of Jewish thought and culture, a city in the spiritual sense corresponds to doctrine – the systematic structure of thought that provides understanding of all the scattered information that comes to us in the commerce of our daily lives. Stones represent truths, and children represent the innocence of willingness to live according to the truth. What the Lord was here predicting, then, was not so much the destruction of a physical city as it was the final judgment on a way of life completely corrupted by falsity and abuse.

Once in Jerusalem, then, we are told that the Lord went directly to the temple and cast out the money-changers and religious opportunists. Arguably this was the event that most upset the scribes and Pharisees, consolidating their determination to get rid of Him. It was perhaps OK for Him to heal people of their illnesses or teach them about the kingdom of God, but now He was meddling in their business and economic lives! Things were getting out of hand! By the way, this was the *second time* He had driven out the money-changers: the first time was very early in His ministry, in fact shortly after His first miracle of turning water into wine up in Cana of Galilee. That incident was recorded in John's Gospel (chapter 2) and specifically mentions His use of a whip to chase the merchants out. So events were now coming full circle, but now with the apparent support of great multitudes, and the Jewish hierarchy had had enough.

Not surprisingly, then, the people who supported that abuse fairly quickly opened themselves up to some of the most damning criticism in all of the Lord's ministry, as recorded in Matthew, chapter 23. But in the midst of it all, one two-line verse reminds us of the Lord's real purpose: after He drove out those who bought and sold, we read, "*Then the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them.*" The blind and lame represent all those who acknowledge their spiritual needs and limitations, specifically their inability to see the truth and their *need* for the truth to support their good intentions. These are the people the Lord can help since they're the ones who want His help, and they are free and able to receive it as soon as the evils and falsities corrupting their lives are removed.

So although the sharpest criticisms of the hypocrisy associated with Jerusalem at the time came the day *after* the Lord's triumphal entry, we can still see the events of that day as the major turning point quickly propelling events toward His crucifixion only 5 days later. And we note particularly that the Lord did NOTHING to prevent or deter this action. In fact He almost seemed to welcome and encourage it. Again, He knew what He had to do and He knew how and when He had to do it. He knew that it would not be possible for His disciples or the multitudes to resist the pressure of worldly influence and concern; the only question was whether people would learn anything from His suffering and believe in Him *after* His death and resurrection.

So He continued – more aggressively than ever – to teach every day in the Temple (Luke 19:47), exposing the hypocrisy and illegitimacy of the Jewish authorities, and preparing the disciples for the end. Even the Last Supper, which we will also commemorate in a few days, was part of that preparation, as He said of the bread and wine, “This do in remembrance of Me” (Luke 22:19). And indeed, it was in the breaking of bread with two of the disciples after the resurrection that they did remember Him, and knew Him, and were convinced of His love, His wisdom, His authority and His power.

There is of course much more we could say about the rest of this week in the Lord’s earthly life, and much more we could say about His own or spiritual states as He neared the completion of His glorification process. But for now the challenge is to see how just this one day, this day of great celebration and great misunderstanding by the people, relates to us at this moment in our lives.

First of all, are **we** living out an unalterable script in relation to the prophecies of the Word, or do we truly have a choice in how we will respond to this story? Of course the Writings assure us that we **DO** have a choice and that nothing in the Word requires us to be the way the people of Jerusalem were as the Lord approached His crucifixion. On the other hand, the story, like all prophecy, is a warning as to what the consequences will be if we don’t take heed. For example, the doctrines are very clear that the way the Jews treated the Lord *perfectly represented* the way they had treated the Word “with respect to its Divine truths, which all treat of the Lord” (DLord 16:6). Is it any different for us today? The way we treat the Word is perfectly indicative of the way we would treat the Lord Himself if He were here in person with us.

Do we understand what He really intends for us – spiritually – or are we, too, expecting a savior who will solve all our *worldly* problems for us? If the latter is what we think, we are in for some sad disappointments, and in fact we will probably betray and abandon Him just as His disciples did. The Lord **KNEW** He had a cross to bear and He has told us plainly that if we want to be His disciples we must take up **OUR** crosses daily and follow Him. It won’t be easy and it won’t be pretty. There is a **LOT** within ourselves that we have to confront, and things won’t get any better for us until we do. So the Lord encourages us to get on with it: as in His own life He tells us what we must do and how and when we must do it. The only question is, will we do it? And since He also knows we can’t do it on our own, He encourages us to work with Him and at the very least to remember what He has taught us so that after we try things our own way and fail we are prepared to see Him anew and accept Him then in a way we couldn’t have done before.

Finally, we can lay down the palm leaves and garments of our own understanding in favor of the Lord’s will and wisdom. And we can in the temple of our minds get the healing we need as soon as we see Him clearing out the corrupting selfish, worldly influences that otherwise dominate our thinking and our lives. Then, from there, we can carry on every day hearing, acknowledging and living by the teaching He continues to provide in the holy temple that is His Word within us.

Amen.

Lessons: *Matthew* 21:1-17
Children’s Talk on Providence on Palm Sunday

Psalms 24 and *Divine Providence* #333 (see also AC #9212:6)