

Palm Sunday: the Cleansing of the Temple

A sermon by the Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, March 29th, 2015

Then Jesus went into the temple of God and drove out all those who sold and bought in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. And He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you have made it a 'den of thieves.'"

Then the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them.
(Matthew 21:12-14)

The story of Palm Sunday is fascinating and important for a number of reasons, not least of which is the whole context leading up to it, including a certain focus on money. The Lord for several days had been predicting His crucifixion AND His resurrection, and so His focus was definitely on His – and everyone's – inner, spiritual life. It is notable, then, that in these last days He told several stories and gave several illustrations of His teaching in a context of worldly wealth, and on His triumphal entry into Jerusalem for this last week went directly to the temple where He condemned the money-*changers* and upset their businesses.

The contrast between natural life and spiritual life in all these references is urgent. But more particularly, the focus on money and money-*changers*, and the reference to "a den of thieves" in the temple calls our attention to the real problems that the Lord came to address. And these are not problems that He solved once and for all at that time, though He certainly demonstrated His power over them. These are problems that we all continue to face as long as we live in this world, challenges that the Lord overcame in Himself but for which we need His help to overcome in ourselves.

Imagine the scene in old Jerusalem. Jesus is riding on a simple donkey working His way down the sloping path from the Mount of Olives across the little brook in the valley below and then gradually up again toward the temple, which rises imposingly in the distance above Him. A person typically would not walk straight down the hill and straight up again but take a more gradually sloping path entering through a gate in the city's wall several hundred yards south of the temple itself. As the Lord and His disciples follow this course more and more people join them and before long, we read, "a very great multitude" gathers around them and, picking up on the ancient symbolism of the donkey ride and recalling the Scriptures about this, begins to celebrate the arrival of their new king with a lot of shouting and commotion. Leafy branches including palms are spread in the path and many also throw down their garments as a token of their allegiance to the Lord. It all seems very hopeful and positive, and certainly consistent with all the miracles for which He had now become famous.

His dramatic actions in the temple itself do nothing to diminish the crowd's excitement. Here at last is their true liberator, the one who will not only free them from Roman rule but from the harsh control of the Scribes and Pharisees who are in their pockets!

But the thrill is short-lived. As the Lord becomes more and more aggressive with the Jewish authorities they respond by going underground, so to speak, plotting behind the scenes, working under cover of darkness to get rid of this disruptive populist and maintain their control. Have a look sometime at the narrative in Matthew 21 following the Palm Sunday events. Page after

page is in red type, almost all the Lord speaking, until you come to chapter 26 when the plot to destroy Him comes out into the open.

Now we know what motivated the Lord's enemies: they were desperate to hold on to their power and influence. We know as well that there are similar forces at work in the Christian Church today – certainly not everywhere but in many organizations that have well developed lines of doctrine, authority and what is sometimes called church polity, that is, the *right* way of doing things. Some might even say we are burdened with the same issues in our own church insofar as the ministers dictate the way things should be and the members have no say. But actually, in my experience a minister of the New Church has very little authority, and what little he does have he is obliged to share with the membership by means of careful study, counsel, discussion and mutual agreement. The real problem WE face as a church is whether or not we take our authority from the Lord, and whether we take that authority seriously.

So let's go back to the scene at the temple where the Lord is casting out the money-changers. What do these people represent in our lives, and what is our response to the Lord's actions? On one hand we can share His indignation, knowing that those money-changers were actually the worst sort of opportunists, capitalizing on people's religious devotion to sell them required offerings at outrageous prices for their own profit.

On the other hand, we need to be aware that ALL the characters in this story represent elements within ourselves, from the Lord Himself who is present in a true and good conscience to the very Scribes and Pharisees we would condemn. And there's the rub.

It's all very exciting to contemplate the new freedom represented by the disruption of external authority in our lives, and it's great to be able to point to the Lord, especially as He has now revealed Himself in the heavenly doctrines, and proclaim our allegiance to Him. But what about the practical, worldly part of ourselves, the opportunistic part that feels threatened by the disruption and worried about losing control. It's NOT EASY to let go of our preconceived ideas, and it's even more difficult to subordinate our worldly needs to the demands of a truly spiritual life.

Suppose, for example, that you are faced with a choice of answering a job interview question completely honestly knowing that it might result in a lost opportunity, or simply not mentioning a particular limitation that you know might compromise your work in that position. You know very well that you could easily justify the latter course, but is it right? Is it good? Good for whom? – you or your potential employer? Assuming you have all the other qualities needed for the job wouldn't it be better to acknowledge the limitation and make a helpful case for dealing with it? Or suppose you are really – justifiably – angry with somebody about something foolish or inconsiderate that this person did. You know the Lord doesn't condone that anger, in fact He specifically warns against it. But man! It's hard to let it go, and even harder actually to “love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you” (Matt. 5:44). Really. It's fun to be on a winning team, but when you feel people are against you – for whatever reason – it's not so easy to adopt the right attitude.

But even these may be relatively superficial illustrations of the bigger issues playing out on Palm Sunday. Remember, Matthew says, “Jesus went into the temple of God and drove out all those who sold and bought in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves,” saying “It is written, My house shall be called a house of prayer,

but you have made it a den of thieves” (Matt. 21:12-13). Every word here is significant. The name, Jesus, means Savior, and refers specifically to the Divine love. “The temple of God” is “code” for the Divine Truth which was represented in all aspects of the temple, from the stone of its walls to the lampstand inside. Buying and selling spiritually represent acquiring and teaching, and it is at least interesting that in the original Greek *selling is mentioned first*, then buying. Why? Well, if you’re doing it for your own gain you’re most likely going to teach *your own ideas*, not necessarily the truth in its own right. In any case it’s never the truth if it doesn’t involve what is good, and if we teach from a desire to serve ourselves we’ve lost that good. Then when we go to the temple to buy, whatever we come away with is corrupted by our selfish loves.

“The tables of the money-changers” are said to signify those who make gain for themselves by means of sacred truths” (AE 840:4), the money itself representing spiritual wealth, which is knowledge, and the “change” element representing the abuse of that knowledge for personal gain. By the way, those “tables” may not have been wooden structures at all, but account books, though it amounts to the same thing spiritually, that is, a place where accounts were kept, which the Lord “overthrew.” Since verbs retain essentially the same meaning whether in the natural or the spiritual sense, the meaning of this verse is clear, namely, that the Lord completely rejects any efforts we make to teach or learn the truths of the Word for profit, since to do so is a form of theft and is the direct opposite of going to the Lord in the humility of true prayer.

The same may be said of those who sold doves. A dove in general represents the truth of faith (AC 870, 875), but in this context particularly that truth applied to the good of life, so “the seats of those who sold doves” represent those who try to profit from the good of faith instead of just doing it because it is the right thing to do (AE 840:4).

Now, what does all this mean in terms of practical application? Let’s go back to our previous examples. Now we’re not just doing something mildly unethical in order to get work; we’re not just angry or upset because someone has slighted us. Now we’re going to the Word itself looking for justification. We’re finding passages in the literal sense or in the doctrines that seem to support our disingenuousness or anger. And, you know, there are plenty of them! Remember, the Lord said we should be as prudent as serpents. He praised the unjust steward in Luke 16:8 for being shrewd and devious. He regularly forgave sinners. And in the Writings He reminds us of our obligations to our families, for whom we need to provide. And with regard to anger there are plenty of stories in the Word where the Lord seems to condone it and even express it Himself, as in this very incident on Palm Sunday. Never mind that the passages forbidding such behaviors far outweigh the ones that seem to condone them, or that deeper analysis of the context would prove our justifications wrong. Once we’ve made up our minds that we have a right to such actions or feelings we tend to latch onto anything in the Word that makes them OK.

It is of course a sensitive topic, but in the New Church we have a particular challenge with the teachings about true marriage love. There’s a whole section of the book on marriage that gives provisions for legitimate separation and divorce. And it is absolutely true that these legitimate reasons may include permission to form new relationships. But, oh, how easy it is to go into this holy temple of doctrine to sell and buy concepts until we find what works for our own satisfaction, convenience or comfort! As they say, “Let the buyer beware.” It is hard to read the doctrines objectively when our emotions are in turmoil. Surely it is better to go first to a trained, experienced Christian counselor and get some perspective, then go the doctrines in humility, asking for the Lord’s guidance on how to BE a better partner, not how to GET a better partner.

What's at stake, of course, is our own innocence. We may or may not deserve a better, happier life than the one we have now, but the key to the heavenly kingdom is *not* getting what we think we deserve, it is doing the right thing even when it's painful and difficult. That's why so much of what the Lord said in this last week of His earthly life was focused on the disciples letting go of their attachments to this world, including worldly wealth and pleasure.

When the Lord entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday He didn't mess around. He went straight to the temple and "drove out those who sold and bought, and overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves. This is commonly referred to as the cleansing of the temple. But in fact, that wasn't the only time He did this! If we go all the way back to the second chapter of John, right after His first recorded miracle, we find that He did the same thing, only *then* He drove out those who sold sheep and oxen as well – *and then He used a whip!* Sheep and oxen represent the good of internal and external innocence, that is, the willingness to be led by the Lord, and of course those who sold them for abusive profit represent those who abuse that innocence, or those states within ourselves that are inclined that way.

But, we may ask, was the Lord really angry? Or was He really just consumed with zeal for the defense of the good? We know the answer. And so we know that we also must act, passionately if necessary, not with anger but with true zeal according to our own conscience to *defend the good in ourselves and others* by not caving in to the self-centered cravings we may feel for control and manipulation of the truths and goods of the Word to get what we want. The Word speaks for itself. The doctrine speaks for itself. Yes, it takes time, and perhaps even something tragic or miraculous for us to get the message. But until then we need to subordinate ourselves to the Word as our final authority and let the Lord guide us even though it may be difficult, even though we may *think* we know better.

What the Lord did on His first recorded adult visit to Jerusalem He did again on His last visit, bracketing almost His entire ministry with these two powerful statements. And just as Jesus did this among the Jews of ancient Israel, so He does it again today if we are willing to invite Him through the gates into the fortified city of our thoughts where He can speak freely, calling out our selfishness, condemning our hypocrisy, correcting our mistaken ideas, and preparing us, not for life in this world but for eternal life based on determined personal sacrifice here and now.

Amen.

Lessons: *Matthew* 21:1-17
 Children's talk about Palm Sunday

Zechariah 8:9-17 and 9:9-13
Arcana Caelestia #8939:1-2