

Palm Sunday, April 14th, 2019
a Celebration of Spiritual Life

a sermon by the Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD

“Lift up your heads, O you gates! And be lifted up, you everlasting doors! And the King of glory shall come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle.

“Lift up your heads, O you gates! Lift up, you everlasting doors! And the King of glory shall come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, He is the King of glory.” ~ Psalm 24:7-10

As the Lord entered the final week of His life on earth the tension in the atmosphere, especially in Jerusalem, was reaching a critical point. More than once already some had taken up stones to kill Him for blasphemy, while others could not have been more thrilled at His wonderful words and healing miracles. And even though He continued to reassure His disciples, by this time He had already predicted His crucifixion on at least three occasions. In short some loved Him and some absolutely hated Him, and the clash between these two forces was mounting by the hour.

It was in this context that He prepared to enter Jerusalem for nearly the last time. In this case He approached from the Mount of Olives, just to the East of Jerusalem, on the other side of a little valley with a stream running through it. And we read that He rode a donkey down that slope, across the stream and up again to enter the temple, perched as it was on Mount Zion. If you're interested you can find a map of the city in the back of your pew Bibles, and you can imagine the path He followed, more or less directly to what is called the East

Gate (or sometimes the Golden Gate) leading right into the temple courtyard. If you look, by the way, you will also see the location of the Garden of Gethsemane part way up the Mount of Olives.

This short journey is mentioned in all four Gospels, each focused on slightly different details. For example, the palm branches are mentioned only in *John*. *Matthew* and *Mark* mention only “branches of trees” and *Luke* mentions only the *garments* people spread on the road, not the branches. *Matthew* and *Mark* are the only ones that mention the fig tree that the Lord cursed, *Luke* is the only one that mentions Jesus weeping over the city as He approached it, and *John* is the only one that recalls the resurrection of Lazarus at this time. On the other hand, *John* is the only one that *doesn't* mention the Lord going into the temple and casting out the merchants at that time. Instead, *John* describes that event – or one just like it – in the very beginning of His ministry (ch. 2). All the Gospels stories about this grand entrance into Jerusalem however quote from *Psalms* 118, from which we read as a recitation today. We will be looking at all these details among others in the class to be held here at the church on Good Friday evening.

For now, I invite you to open those pew Bibles to *Psalm* 24, which you heard as our second lesson (it's on page 631). Beginning at verse 3 you'll see the reference to “the hill of the Lord” and “His holy place:” literally that is the temple mount in Jerusalem. And who may ascend to that place? – only the One who has clean hands and a pure heart, as described. This is the promised Messiah, the Lord, Jesus Christ, who alone of all people truly fits this description.

Then, beginning at verse 7, you read about gates being lifted up and *the King of glory coming in*. The East Gate to the temple mount was an imposingly large, double vaulted entrance well suited for ceremonial entries, and you can imagine the big iron gates being hoisted up to allow passage, almost as in an old European castle.

Then, “Who is this King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty; the Lord mighty in battle.” This of course refers to His war against the evils and falsities that had corrupted the church. He is called the King of *glory* because of the pure light of truth He brought to bear on that corruption.

In fact the whole Psalm is a prophecy of the events of Palm Sunday, but it’s especially interesting in that while it’s a celebration of victory we know that the Lord’s battles at that point were far from over. Rather this was the prelude to the very worst temptations of all, both for Him and for His disciples, and so there is a certain irony in the whole occasion. This irony is what we need to understand today.

On one hand the Lord’s victory in His own war against the hells was certain. There is no way the forces of evil and falsity could ever win against the God of all the universe, even though He had presented Himself in a natural human form with all its limitations. His soul was Divine and His mind was formed by the infinite truths of the Word. It was inevitable that He would overcome all of those limitations as He glorified His Humanity. What was NOT certain was whether this would be sufficient for the salvation of the human race on earth, that is, whether specific people would in their freedom choose to believe and live as He implored them to do. So His temptations were not about His own success or failure, they were not about whether He would be glorified and rise from the grave after the crucifixion; He had predicted His resurrection *every time He predicted His death*. Rather His temptations arose from His love for the whole human race and His knowledge that despite His perfect work there would be some, even many, who would not allow themselves to benefit, and who would choose life in hell rather than heaven.

This accounts for the sadness mentioned in Luke where, in spite of the loud celebration and all the shouts of praise around Him, we

read, "... 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'" (19:41-42). And we know that this sadness became real agony on the cross – again, not primarily on account of the physical pain He suffered, although that must have been excruciating, but because, as He said pleading for *their* forgiveness, "they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

The Temptations

So let's reflect now on these temptations, and then return to the Lord's victory.

There are, we read, two great heavenly loves, and two particular loves that lead to hell. Of course we know that the good ones are the humble loves of the Lord, the Source of all good, and of the neighbor, whom the Lord also loves; one is celestial, the other spiritual. And the bad ones are the consuming loves of self and the world, which two ultimately include the desire to dominate over everyone and to possess or control everything around us. For most of our lives in this world we are all a mix of all four of these loves, each of us in our own unique way. And that mix was very much in evidence when the Lord rode triumphantly into Jerusalem.

For a start the people were deceived by their love of the world. They really thought the Lord was going to free them from the oppression of the Romans AND the manipulative control of their own religious leaders. Caught up in the excitement of the day they had forgotten that the Lord's kingdom is not of this world. But then, associated with this, they also thought that once the tables were turned *they* would get to dominate over everyone else. These two loves would be exposed in the devastating day of the crucifixion, but in

the moment, on that day of jubilation, everything seemed to be going their way.

At the same time the Lord permitted the celebration, and in fact specifically arranged for it, not only to fulfill the prophecies of the Psalms but to provide a literal, physical basis for the genuine truth that was unfolding on a *deeper level*, namely, that the Lord really was overcoming all the opposition to His Word.

The events immediately preceding and immediately following the procession reveal the tension in the story and demonstrate this point. In Matthew's Gospel, for example, before they went up to the Mount of Olives, James and John came with their mother asking to be given the authority to rule with the Lord in His kingdom. And of course the Lord had to call them out over this.

Then, after entering the city, Jesus immediately went into the temple "and drove out all those who sold and bought [there] and overturned the tables of the moneychangers" (Matt 21:12). The next day, having spent the night in Bethany, He came back again to confront the hypocrites in Jerusalem, and on the way cursed the fig tree that was full of leaves without any fruit. This fruitless tree represents faith without charity, which is faith or knowledge that allows for the indulgence of any selfish pleasure.

So there you have it: the Lord challenging and overcoming the loves of self and the world. This is the real reason for the celebration on Palm Sunday. This is the real reason He rode into Jerusalem, humbly but in a regal fashion, on a path paved with the leaves and garments of the people representing their acknowledgment of Him. But did the disciples really understand? Evidently not. And the events that unfolded over the next few days confirmed it.

The Victory

But the Lord did not come into this world to compel belief *or* cooperation with Him. Rather He came to restore the balance, or equilibrium, between good and evil so that people would be free to choose without coercion, deception or any other fear-based pressure whether they (or whether *we*) would follow Him in a spiritual life or not. He came to prove, for all who are willing to believe it, that He has the ultimate plan *and power* to provide for our *eternal* happiness and peace.

In the end, this would be accomplished in His resurrection. But until then His teaching and His miracles continued, all contributing to the evidence the disciples would see when they *remembered* these things in the weeks following Easter. The Gospel of *John* is particularly helpful in this regard, as the Lord specifically said, “Most assuredly ... unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies it produces much grain. He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (12:24-25). Then, a few chapters and much more teaching later, He said, “These things I have told you, that when the time comes, you may *remember* that I told you of them” (16:4).

And so it was. Even going all the way back to the beginning of John, where the Lord’s confrontation with the moneychangers (the “den of thieves”) was first mentioned, and He spoke of the temple being destroyed and rebuilt in just three days, we read, “Therefore, when He had risen from the dead, His disciples remembered that He had said this to them; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had said” (John 2:22). And again, in John’s account of the triumphal entry, we read, “His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they *remembered* that these things were written about Him and that they had done these things to Him” (12:16).

The point of having all these things to remember is that when we think about experiences we have had in the past and reflect on them apart from the pressure of an immediate need or threat, then we have the capacity to reason objectively and to draw conclusions in freedom, conclusions that represent our internal, spiritual and not just our external, natural states. (Of course, once we make up our minds we have to act on our conclusions since our actions will confirm what we really think. But the process begins in the privacy of our own hearts and minds.)

In the case of the disciples the Lord knew they wouldn't understand *or* truly believe in Him until they saw Him in the resurrection and then had the opportunity to reflect on all their previous experience with Him. And as you know from the book of Acts and the Epistles, for the most part this had the desired effect. One after another these men and women sacrificed their lives for the Lord in the absolute confidence that He would save their souls and provide for their eternal lives.

But on the day itself of the Lord's grand entrance into Jerusalem none of this was certain. Yes, they welcomed Him as their King and Savior, but within a few days they would all abandon Him. Yes, they recognized His love, His wisdom, and His power, but they didn't understand how He could allow Himself to be crucified. They were stuck in material ideas and self-centered concerns – UNTIL their eyes were opened to see Him glorified and their hearts were moved by His compassion after all that they had done to Him. Remember how the hearts of the two on the road to Emmaus burned within them as the Lord "expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself," and then how He was known to them in the breaking of bread, the universal symbol for the good of love (Luke 24:27, 31).

It is the same with us today. Remember the laws of Providence you heard in our third lesson. Even if the Lord were to appear to us as He appeared to the disciples we would still have to think about whether to believe what we were seeing or not, but if we reflect on His Word and allow Him to affect us personally with His truth, then we will recognize Him, and then, little by little we, too, will gain complete confidence in Him (see *AE* 1173:2 and *AC* 5952), laying down the leaves and garments of our own ideas in a genuine willingness to receive, and in heartfelt deference to, the wisdom of the Lord.

Amen.

Lessons: *John* 12:1-16

Psalm 24

Headings from *DP* #71, 100, 129, 154 & 175
on the five basic laws of Providence