

## **Introduction to Palm/Passion Sunday –April 5, 2020**

The last week of our Lord's life begins with a palm procession, commemorating his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Quickly the tone changes as we meditate upon Jesus' passion and death. Though Jesus is obedient even unto death on the cross, he is exalted by God. We gather to remember his offering for the life of the world, and to be fed by his life-giving mercy.

### **Gospel Readings**

**Matthew 21.1-11:** <sup>1</sup>When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, <sup>2</sup>saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. <sup>3</sup>If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." <sup>4</sup>This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, <sup>5</sup>"Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

<sup>6</sup>The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; <sup>7</sup>they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. <sup>8</sup>A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. <sup>9</sup>The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" <sup>10</sup>When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" <sup>11</sup>The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

**Matthew 27.15-23:** <sup>15</sup> Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. <sup>16</sup>At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. <sup>17</sup>So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, 'Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?' <sup>18</sup>For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. <sup>19</sup>While he was sitting on the judgement seat, his wife sent word to him, 'Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.' <sup>20</sup>Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. <sup>21</sup>The governor again said to them, 'Which of the two do you want me to release for you?' And they said, 'Barabbas.' <sup>22</sup>Pilate said to them, 'Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?' All of them said, 'Let him be crucified!' <sup>23</sup>Then he asked, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they shouted all the more, 'Let him be crucified!'

### **'Triumph Becomes Tragedy'**

**Let us pray.** *Father in heaven, you anointed your Son Jesus, **not to** rule a kingdom won by the exercise of power, **but to** bear witnesses to its presence among us; **not to** reign in arrogance, **but to** serve in humility and love; **not to** mirror this world's powers, **but to** inherit a dominion that will not pass away. Our prayer this day is that you might lift our eyes to the place of Jesus' enthronement. Nailed to that hateful tree, he became our Lord as we suffer on crosses of our own. Holy God, let Christ the King forgive our sin and remember us in his Kingdom. We pray in the name of Jesus, the Crucified, but now living King, amen.*

**Brothers and sisters, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.**

What a strange way to begin the last week of one's life . . . St. Mark tells the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem . . . *It was a such a promising start . . .* But in five short days, success turned into failure . . . Hopes were dashed . . . Jesus was on his way to the cross and those closest to him were hunted as criminals. If we didn't already know the story, we would be forced ask, *'What happened? . . . How could something that started so well, end so badly? . . . What turned triumph into tragedy?*

**Today is Palm Sunday . . . or, as it has come to be known, Passion Sunday. Palm Sunday** because it commemorates our Lord's triumphant entry into Jerusalem; and **Passion Sunday** because it marks the beginning of his final confrontation with the powers that seek to destroy him. What seemingly appears to begin as a victory, quickly becomes a bitter defeat.

From the Evangelist Matthew's Gospel, it appears that our Lord's parade-like entry into Jerusalem was rather strange affair. Jesus was person of some renown whose reputation had preceded him. People were curious about this rabbi from the north. Some said he was a teacher and a healer; others, a preacher and a prophet; and still others saw him as the long-promised Messiah. So when Jesus came to Jerusalem for Passover, there was a sense of expectation in the air.

The people were not disappointed; Jesus entered the city riding on a young donkey. To modern eyes, this seems ludicrous; but to the eyes of those who waited for the Messiah, it was the fulfillment of prophecy. They all remembered words of the prophet Zechariah who wrote: ***'Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a colt, the foal of an ass.'***

In Jesus, they saw the Messiah coming to the Holy City . . . They saw the One who could make their lives . . . the One who could bring peace . . . the One who could be God's instrument against the hated Romans. As Jesus entered Jerusalem, they spread their cloaks on the road and covered the way with palm branches. As the parade entered the city's gate they shouted, ***'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!'***

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday is a microcosm of our lives. We live it over and over again when Jesus enters our own personal holy cities. And like the people who first cut palm branches to throw at Jesus' feet, we already know Jesus for whom he is. We join his parade shouting ***'Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!'*** We join his parade, hoping that Jesus is the One who can make our lives better . . . **The One** who can heal us of our pain . . . **The One** who can finally bring us peace forever.

But like our forebears in faith, we are also fickle. In a few short days, we also stand in judgment of the One who comes to us riding on a donkey. We judge him because we cannot

bear his claims. We do not desire a God who comes so close to us . . . One who challenges us to put him before all other gods. Sinners that we are, the parade soon turns ugly. No longer do we shout **'Hosanna!'** but rather, **'Crucify him!'**

Palm Sunday is truly a parade . . . A parade that begins as a profession of faith and ends with a travesty of justice when we hand down the death sentence for our Savior. We join the crowds in the praetorium who shout to Pontius Pilate, **'Let him be crucified . . . May his blood be upon us and our children!'** This is a terrible story that speaks of the darkness within our hearts. But paradoxically, our defiant condemnation of Christ, provides a means for God to bring salvation to sinners like you and me.

*Palm Sunday*, I think, reveals our divided loyalties. Yes, we know Jesus for who he really is. On Communion Sundays we confess in the Nicene Creed that we *'believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son our Lord . . . who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. And on the third day he rose again from the dead.'* But we continue to live our lives as if these words have meaning only on Sunday. We put self-interest before our commitment to God. We forget that we have been chosen in baptism to be children of God, and choose, instead, to be children of the world.

I think that this *Palm Sunday* brings a disquieting reminder that we are sinners . . . Sinners who see the Jesus, not as the One who gives life, but as a threat to life as we want to live it. In the broad sweep of history, we Christians are no better than those who are not *Christian*. Sometimes, we may even have been more uncompromising, more brutal, and far less forgiving.

There's no little irony in the fact that the followers of the Messiah who was unjustly condemned, tortured, and executed, took it upon themselves, when they had the opportunity, to torture and execute others in the name of this same Jesus. **Those who name themselves with the name of Jesus have knowingly persecuted those who do not believe as they do . . . They have** burned people at the stake for having the wrong theology . . . **They have** condemned the very sinners to hell that Jesus commands his disciples to seek out . . . **And they have** used religion as an excuse to exploit economically others who are less powerful than they are. **All in the name of Jesus and the grace of God!**

Sometimes those who wear the cross of Jesus and hail him as *'Lord and Savior,'* seek to live the *'godly life'* while not seeing the poor, the welfare recipient, the AFDC family, the AIDS victim, the grieving, and the hungry as brothers and sisters. And finally, those who are regarded as sinners by God and forgiven through the death of Jesus, oftentimes fail to offer the same forgiveness to those who sin against them.

We may not be overt in our rejection, **but anytime** we speak ill of a brother or sister . . . **Anytime** we rationalize judgments made on the basis of ethnic origin, sexual preference, economic status, or family history . . . **Anytime** we presume to judge the sin of others . . . We join the Jerusalem mob and shout, **'Give us Barabbas! We want no part of this Jesus. Crucify him!'** In the Dupree's *Stations of the Cross*, we find the words: *'We have judged God and*

condemned him to death. We no longer want Jesus Christ with us because he has become a bother to us . . . We have no other king than Caesar . . . No other law than blood and gold. Take him away. He is a scandal to the Jews and nonsense to us. Give us Barabbas!

Today is Palm Sunday . . . Today is also Passion Sunday . . . It is time to choose. Will you shout '**Hosanna!**' or will it be '**Crucify him!**' But be aware: **The Crucified Christ is also the Risen Christ . . . And he has already chosen you and me in baptism.** What will we shout today? Amen.  
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