

Palm Sunday, April 5, 2020

(Matthew 21:1-11; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-29; Isaiah 50:4-9a; Philippians 2:5-11)

The holy gospel according to Matthew, the 21st chapter: (Glory to you, O Lord!)

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, 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. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet:

Tell Daughter Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey (Zechariah 9:9; Isaiah 61:11).

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

"Hosanna to the Son of David! (Isaiah 9:7) Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! (Psalm 118:26) Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee." -- This is the gospel of our Lord. (Praise to you, O Christ!)

The first “Palm Sunday” was about a week before the Resurrection. After entering Jerusalem, Jesus spent several days preaching and teaching in the temple courtyard (depending on which gospel you read).

Though the gospel tells us “the whole city was stirred,” that’s probably untrue. Jerusalem was a very large city, most of its 13 gates long distances apart. It’s likely there *was* quite a stir at the gate through which Jesus entered, probably the Gate Beautiful, since this is closest to Bethphage; but it’s pretty certain that didn’t extend to “the whole city.”

We know that “crowds” gathered to follow Jesus everywhere he went. (We know he once fed 5000 men plus their women and children.) We also know that during Passover week every year, millions made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast in the holy city. The weather then would have been about like ours; as I write this on Wednesday, it’s currently 47 in Jerusalem.

Jesus quotes the Prophets Isaiah and Zechariah; Matthew, in recording his version of “the good news of God in Jesus Christ,” quotes from a different chapter from Isaiah and from Psalm 118.

Jesus entered Jerusalem as a king, mounted on a steed. He entered as a humble person, mounted on a donkey. His coming fulfilled prophecies of restoration and salvation, and prophecies of rejection.

The crowds shouted, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” *Hosanna* means *save*. It doesn’t give praise to Jesus or God; it doesn’t mean *hooray* or *wonderful*. It’s a cry for help, for deliverance from the Roman army that occupied their capitol city.

The above summarizes one way of looking at today’s gospel.

Now to Psalm 118: A lectionary is a collection of readings appointed for each Sunday of the three-year cycle of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Not all lectionaries include Psalm 118 for Palm Sunday. I invite you to read the entire psalm in your own Bible, but I'll include the most pertinent verses below:

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever (1). The Lord is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation (14). I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the Lord has done (17). Open for me the gates of righteousness; I will enter and give thanks to the Lord (19). This is the gate of the Lord through which the righteous may enter (20). I will give you thanks, for you answered me; you have become my salvation (21). The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone (or “capstone”) (22); the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes (23). This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it (24). O Lord, save us; O Lord, grant us success (25). Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord (26a). The Lord is God, and he has made his light shine upon us. With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession (27). You are my God, and I will give you thanks; you are my God, and I will exalt you (28). Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever (29—same as verse 1).

As often happens in the Psalms, 118 begins with thanksgiving and praise; this particular psalm also ends with the same words of praise and thanksgiving. The verses in between reveal the writer's trust in God. God has always saved and delivered, therefore we can always trust that God will continue to do so. *The Lord is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation* (v. 1).

Palm Sunday is a time when worlds collide:

- Jesus, Son of God (and thus Messiah, the Anointed, the Chosen One who will deliver God's people)—Jesus triumphantly enters the city that will turn its back on him in just five days.

- Children’s voices sing sweet hosannas, begging for salvation and deliverance from the brutal political and religious forces trying to get rid of him.
- Crowds of pilgrims, probably mostly poor, wave palm branches to welcome a king, while those in power—the *real* authorities, with real swords and spears, are doing their best to keep the peace, to maintain the delicate balance between King Herod (Roman puppet) and his Jewish people, so the Romans don’t come down harder on them.

In just five days the *Hosannas* will turn to *Crucify him, crucify him!* The late William Sloane Coffin, minister of Riverside Church in New York, wrote in 1979, “Doesn’t Palm Sunday make you want to hope that somehow Good Friday won’t be necessary? (Coffin, *Sermons, vol. 1*, p. 158)

If we could welcome Jesus into our world today, would he even be recognized?

How would he be greeted? If we recognized him, certainly we, too, would cry out, *Hosannah! Save us! Save us from the uncertainty and chaos of this present time. Save us from political turmoil and deadly disease. Save us from our hard hearts, so easily frozen in confusion, afraid to reach out lest we reach for the wrong goals. Save us, Jesus!*

Jesus said, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” We don’t have trouble believing his words, but sometimes we find it hard to know the truth.

At this end of the Lenten season of fasting, repentance, and prayer, we remember with joy and thanksgiving that ***Jesus IS the way, and the truth, and the life. He is Emmanu-el, God-with-us always, even to the end of the age. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. He is the Good Shepherd, the Almighty Prince of Peace.***

