

The Tension of Palm Sunday
John 12:12-33 (34-43)
Palm Sunday
April 14, 2019

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, Jesus says, “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

It’s understandable that we would sense a tension about Palm Sunday. On the one hand, it seems festive; on the other hand, an aura of solemnity is palpable. On the one hand, children sing their praises; on the other hand, an eerie silence replaces the Gloria Patri. On the one hand, the crowds praise him and lay their cloaks on the path in front of him; on the other hand, the religious leaders hate him and seek ways to kill him. On the one hand, it seems the culmination of a king; on the other hand, it ushers in the culmination of our Lord’s suffering and passion.

And that sentiment of tension is not uniquely ours; it’s known quite well in the 118th psalm, that joyful psalm whose most well-known verse served as the antiphon of this morning’s introit: “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” How abundantly that verse rings out on this Palm Sunday, not only in the introit, but in history as the crowds sang it, and also in the divine liturgy, as the whole church on earth, with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, join in the holy refrain and the breathtaking

reality that Christ comes this very hour in the same flesh and blood as when he rode into Jerusalem, indeed the same flesh and blood for which the psalmist longed and for which the Old Covenant waited in eager anticipation of the Messiah.

And yet, the tension in citing that 118th psalm is that it's the same psalm that we heard last week, when Jesus quoted these words, "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." We remember the tension of that moment, as Jesus faced off, if you will, with the religious leaders through the very thinly veiled parable. And, now, we consider it in the context of the joyous 118th psalm... a joy that nevertheless hints at the Messiah's *rejection*, a joy that hints at the *tension* between God's sent Lamb and those who wanted to continue on with their own lambs, a joy that hearkens with thinly veiled symbolism to the Holy Week now upon us when that psalm's second-to-last verse cries, "Bind the festal sacrifice with cords, up to the horns of the altar!" That's the joy – yet weighty solemnity – of this Holy Week now upon us, isn't it? That God is doing exactly what the psalm called for – the festal sacrifice, God's paschal lamb, is on his way to the altar of Calvary.

And so, perhaps all of these sentiments of tension can be summarized by saying that Palm Sunday is so historically important because it is the day in which the fulfillment of the coming Messiah becomes *so imminent* that it is visible – that the same Palm Sunday procession that serves as the *first* reading of Advent now serves as

the reading for the Messiah's march to *fulfill* his mission. This Palm Sunday is the day on which we can most immediately envision Christ beginning to pull the two covenants together – almost like a strongman straining to pull two chained boulders from seemingly immovable positions of separation and all the onlookers are in awe that the unthinkable is actually starting to happen, the great weights are starting to move, and it won't be long until they come crashing together.

Jesus, of course, knows this is the great reality of this Palm Sunday. In fact, St John, writing a few decades later, also knew as he wrote that this is the great reality of this Palm Sunday. And it's not coincidental that John's description of it all, in our gospel reading, echoes that sentiment.

Consider that it is John's gospel that includes the comments of the pharisees, "Look, the world has gone after him." Had the whole world gone after him? Certainly not literally, and yet – yes – that week was of worldwide import, and now "the whole world" knew it – not just Jews, but Greeks. In fact, John, whose gospel is believed to have been written to the gnostic Greeks seeking after wisdom, John includes the request of some Greeks who came seeking Jesus: "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." 'Jews demand signs, and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified,' St. Paul agrees with John's gospel. And Paul's epistle continues, "... we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews (there's that Psalm 118 again)

and folly to Gentiles (there are the Greeks of John's gospel again), but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the *wisdom* of God." Yes, what Paul confesses of Christ's person (if you will), St John points to this Palm Sunday and says, "here we see it playing out: 'we wish to see Jesus.' The power of God and wisdom of God bringing the covenants together, and the whole world focusing in on this week to come."

And, not only is the world focused on it, but so is Jesus: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." What good is it for the whole world if Jesus preserves his own life and is not willing to complete his mission as the seed promised from Eden which will fall into the earth and die and – by so doing – draw all nations unto himself? He even says, "I when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." And so, if that is the moment we are now in, if that is the central importance of this hour, if that is the purpose of this seed of the woman, then his question is indeed rhetorical: "What shall I say? Father, save me from his hour? But for this purpose I have come to this hour." Indeed, so central is this hour of Christ's pending crucifixion being ushered in by this Palm Sunday that Jesus says of it, "Now is the judgment of this world."

This should remind us of Jesus' words earlier in John's gospel: In the same breath in which Jesus said "God in this way loved the

world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life”... in the same breath, Jesus says, “This is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light.”

When Christ hangs upon that cross and draws all the nations unto himself, will not the hearts of every man be judged? Is this Jesus *your Lord*, or do you wag your head at him? When he says, “Father, glorify your name,” can that possibly happen on this cross, or are you ashamed of him? When the Father says “I have glorified it and will glorify it again” and thereby promises that the cross is not a bitter end, but the gateway to the resurrection and the glory of the ascended Christ, do we *believe* him, or do our hearts consider it a fairytale that means nothing for daily life and means only ‘fanciful dreams’ for our otherwise depressing march toward death?

St John, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, knows that this is the wrestling in our hearts. Yes, we wish to see Jesus, but for all the wrong reasons: “Jesus, I won’t believe if I don’t see; Jesus, give me my best life now; Jesus, entertain me and make me happy.” And we wish to see Jesus in all the wrong ways – not through the cross and in the Word and Sacraments but through glory – “Let me feel your presence; let me see you place your kingdom over our society. Let my will be done.” It’s all theology of glory! Our hearts want glory, and all we see in the cross is ‘gory.’ Our hearts want the theology of glory, and all we see before us is the cross, at which it is so easy to be

ashamed. How many church bodies even teach their people to look past the cross, get past the cross, “our savior isn’t dead, he’s living!”

And, while He most certainly *is* living, John teaches us Jesus does not want us to be ashamed of his death, and John does so giving the commentary that concludes our reading: “He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die.” Why does he have to say that, unless our sinful hearts may misinterpret the words of Jesus before: “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.”

Don’t our hearts easily misinterpret that, our inner theologies of glory *want* to reinterpret that and say, “Oh yes, when Jesus is lifted up from the earth and ascends into the heavens and is veiled behind the clouds – when all this embarrassing and humiliating talk of sin and death is behind us and all we need focus on is glory – then all nations will flock to this Jesus.” John says, “No, this is not about moving *beyond* the cross; all nations will be drawn *to* the cross, by Jesus’ sacrificial death, by this Lamb of God who takes upon himself the sins of the whole world, by this seed – this grain of wheat – that falls into the earth and – as firstfruits of the resurrection, will raise up with him abundant fruit.”

Now, as we enter Holy Week, we might very well be tempted to go from one extreme, “a theology of glory ashamed of the cross,” to the other extreme, “a theology of the cross ashamed of visible glory.” That’s not true, either. This week to come is not just about

being as solemn as you can, almost like those professional mourners that were hired in ancient days to wail at the death of loved ones. It's not about artificially trying to make your heart tremble or your eye shed a tear. Rather, it's about contemplating and benefiting from the great truth that the Christ has in this holy week of history fulfilled his mission and achieved our salvation, to the great glory of God who promised such deliverance way back in Eden. There is much glory to be had at the culmination of all of this (and even in the midst of our observance of it) for we share with the disciples in the Spirit-inspired faith that puts two and two together regarding all of it. Consider these words of our text: "His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him."

Let's dissect this for just a minute: "When Jesus was glorified, then they remembered." They did not remember when Jesus died, but only when he was risen again, and only fully after he was ascended into heaven and Jesus' own promise came to pass, "I will send you the Holy Spirit, who will bring to your remembrance all things I have given you." Yet, as we've said, Jesus' glory includes the cross, "Father, save me from this hour? No, for this hour I have come. Father, *glorify* your name!" So then, we must understand that Jesus see his glory as both his crucifixion and his resurrection/ascension. They are two sides of the same coin. And that means that even in this week of solemnity, we ought rejoice in

the glory of our crucified Christ, the glory that is his in his sacrifice for our salvation, the glory that is his in revealing to us the wondrous inheritance of the resurrection and the life everlasting that awaits us.

We must also understand in this week the importance of these words: “then they remembered.” The word for “remember” (mimneisko) does not mean an accidental crossing of the mind, as when we sit around the family table and one family member’s stories of times past randomly brings to mind another story of times past. Rather, the word is a very intentional remembrance, caused – Jesus says – by the Holy Spirit “who will bring to your remembrance all things I have given you”, so that you can be called to “Do this in **remembrance** of me” – not as a random memory of stories of times past, but as a matter of faith given by the Holy Spirit that these words are true: “This is my body, this is my blood, for you.” Thus, we walk through this Holy Week anew, not trying to relive the past, but to hear the Word by which the Holy Spirit grants us to remember the joy that is ours, the glory that is God’s, and the sacrificial, sacramental body and blood that is Jesus.’

But then there’s this last little phrase, “then they remembered that these things had been written about *him*.” Notice, they had not been written about some figure called the Christ, and this Jesus just happened to fit the part pretty well. All these things had been written about *him*... the prophets of Old had all been focused on *him*, the promises of Old had all been waiting to be

fulfilled by *him*, for he alone was strong enough to pull the weight of those two covenants together. And, not only must it be written about Him (in which case we're still dealing with the theoretical, the prophetic, and the still-to-be fulfilled *hope* of these things coming to pass) but, St John says, "they remembered that these things had been written about him *and had been done to him.*" It all has come to pass, that you need never think that the promises of God are theoretical, are simply 'fanciful dreams' to fleetingly try and cheer us in the face of death's impending march. These things have not only been written as a promise, but they now have been done to him – endured by him, procured by him, achieved by him, fulfilled by him... him who comes through the gates of Jerusalem unto the glory of the cross and the feast of the altar this day, with the nations drawn unto himself singing anew, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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