

John 12:12-19
Palm Sunday
March 24, 2024

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

Our text, the Palm Sunday procession, as recorded by St John, including these words: “And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written, ‘Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt!’”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

On Palm Sunday, we transition from the *theme-based* Lenten meditation – a meditation on themes like penitence, wrestling against temptation, following our Lord – to a meditation on history.

We must always remember that! If you enter Holy Week trying to make the events of Holy Week ‘thematic’ and “present-tense relevant”, trying to “walk in the steps of Jesus,” you’ll end up making it ‘theatrical’ and ‘dramatic’ and interpreting it as ‘experiential’ and mythologizing it and urging your heart to fervently re-live, rather than faithfully remember, the events of Holy Week.

We ought resist the urge to re-enact our Lord’s passion. “It is finished,” Jesus cried, not only to comfort us with the certainty of justification, but also to limit our efforts to put ourselves in his place. Remember what He has done and accomplished, that you

might here-and-now benefit from the covenant He had planned and promised and instituted and sealed by His blood.

If we cannot *draw ourselves* to faithfully remember or see the importance in remembering, then our Lord *calls us*, commands us, urges us, to remember, to meditate... for Holy Week is truly a meditation on His glory and ours. That's tough for us to fathom, as solemn as this week is... but it is only solemn because we are not only *beneficiary* of, but – in a very true sense – sinful *cause* of Christ's suffering. "... while we were yet enemies, Christ died for us" the Scriptures speak of us as both cause and beneficiary; again, "He is the propitiation for our sins, and not ours only but the sins of the whole world," the Scriptures speak of us as beneficiary and cause. Again, Christ died "the just *for the unjust*," the Scriptures speak of us as beneficiary and cause. Perhaps most pointedly and most famously (and even most piercingly) during this Holy Week, the prophet cries out, "He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities" – we're both beneficiary and cause. And again, "Who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven," the Creed confesses of our need and benefit.

The fact that we are the cause of our Lord's passion upon the cross in history in no way lessens the reason for us to rejoice as beneficiaries of it today in the Means of Grace. Equally so, the

fact that we are the beneficiaries of it in the Means of Grace in no way lessens our solemnity of this week as we recognize our sins were the cause of His passion upon the cross in history. As the cause of it, we hear the reading of the Palm Sunday processional as an almost ominous scene of Jesus riding with fixed determination to his death. As beneficiaries, we hear the reading of the Palm Sunday processional as a compassionate scene of Jesus riding with fixed determination to His triumph.

Of course, it's difficult to see this as triumph because it's the road to suffering and death. Such is the way of the cross – 'way,' not simply meaning '*path* to the cross,' but also meaning 'the cruciform *life*.' Your daily life is different than the world's, different than any neighbor's and co-worker's and friend's life that has not been wrapped in, baptized in, and raised up in the baptism into Christ's death. Sure, Old Adam may notice worldly successes today, their happiness today, their fame and fortune today. Judging by today, their life may not seem that much different... maybe even better... than the life lived at the foot of the cross. Even the Scriptures admit that the baptismal life outwardly draws no envy from the world: "Your life is *hidden* with Christ in God," the apostle says. All the **glory** is veiled ... but it's veiled precisely so that we may not be distracted by its brilliance,

but may keep our eyes fixed on our Lord Jesus Christ, the Author and Perfector of our faith.

Notice that, the Author and Perfector of *our* faith (not just of *the* Faith, but also of our personal baptismal faith and conviction and hope in Him who *for the joy set before him* endured the cross. Yes, as He who went to the cross in veiled glory is the Author and Perfector of *our* faith, then we ought expect our daily and eternal share in His triumph to likewise be veiled. Like the Christ before us, the Christian baptized with the baptism with which Christ was baptized ... that Christian's baptism does not seem a triumph, because it's the road to the Christian's own suffering and death. Mind you, ours is not a suffering at the hands of God over sin – as was the Christ's suffering and death... and ours is not a suffering needed to be accomplished perfectly to secure salvation – as was the Christ's suffering and death on our behalf... but, still, the Christian's baptism in no way seems triumphant because the road ahead in this life is – on account of the world, the devil, and our Old Adam – a road to suffering and death, as if we were sitting atop the colt with Christ, staring at the world's betrayal before us.

Our daily life of being baptismally tied to Christ's death can only can be honestly spoken of as **triumph** if Christ's one-day-in-history entrance into Jerusalem was *truly* a procession of triumph.

And, entering this Holy Week, if we think only thematically and experientially, wanting to relive and re-enact and re-experience what was happening that day, then that historic Palm Sunday procession seems like nothing more than a dead-man walking (or ‘dead-man riding’, as it were)... as it is shrouded in solemnity and sorrow.

But, where the procession appears to be nothing more than a march to shame and death, the Lord’s triumph can be seen when we consider the *intentionality* behind this procession once in history.

That word “intentionality” might not be a Scriptural word, but its meaning resounds throughout the Scriptures, and especially throughout the Gospels, as the Lord’s Christ comes in the flesh to do His Father’s will. Even from childhood, He knows He must be about His Father’s business. Descending from the heights of the mount of Transfiguration, (as Luke records it) he “set his face to Jerusalem” – resolved to complete the mission for which He was sent. He repeats multiple times that He has come into the world for this hour, for this purpose. Christ was not *processed* into, *led* into Jerusalem, captive to forces beyond his control; He came of His own volition, to do His Father’s will, with the intentionality of completing the salvation of the world and securing the eternal inheritance of His Church.

Divine intentionality. Last week, we considered the fore-planning of and intentionality behind the baptism with which Jesus was baptized and the cup of His suffering that he shares commonly in the cup of our blessing. Today, Jesus' intentionality is on full display in the procession into Jerusalem. Truly, a procession of worldly humility... but on account of the divine intentionality of it all, a triumphal procession.

Briefly, before we *totally* leave behind the thematic nature of Lenten disciplines, this is one final way in which we ought see Jesus, so to speak, as example: intentionality. Again, it's not a Scriptural word, and I use it here for teaching purposes, but it's meaning is certainly well-captured in the Scriptures. Your life ought be one of intentionality to follow your Lord. To be "well-intentioned" means **nothing** for justification (in fact, is often a stumbling block to justification by grace alone for Christ's sake alone), but to be "well-intended" or "intentional" can mean quite a lot – faithful wrestling – for sanctification. Do not the Scriptures speak this way, of *intentionally* setting your mind and your daily life on the things of God in Christ Jesus: "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus." Again, "Set your mind on things above, not on things on earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." Again, in our Collect for the Day, what request does the prayer include? – "Mercifully grant that we

may follow the example of His great humility and patience...” Yes, in matters of sanctification our intentionality toward holy living does include learning from and echoing our Lord and Christ!

Even in admitting the difficulty of wrestling against sin and temptation, Paul appeals to the intentionality of the heart,

“For I do not do what I **want**, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not **want**, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but **sin** that dwells within me.... For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.”

Yes, even within the faithful and our well-intentioned following of their Lord, a war wages so commonly that Jesus diagnosed his sleeping disciples in the hour of his betrayal this way: “the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

And so, because we see (and cannot deny) the sinful imperfection even in our intentionality, so that we see how imperfect is even our very best intention and effort to cooperate with the Spirit in sanctification, how much more do we recognize how desperate was our need for Christ’s **perfect** intentionality and His perfect accomplishing of it for our justification and our salvation. How great was our need that He ‘set His face to Jerusalem’ and processed into the city amid shouts of Hosanna that would give way to cries of ‘Crucify.’

And because of that perfect intentionality, that holy ‘face set toward Jerusalem,’ to bear even the cross and all of its shame for our salvation, therefore the procession into Jerusalem is not remembered as dead-man riding, but as the procession of a King, undeterred on his way to win the war and rescue His people. Such is not some glorified fictionalized picture of the account for the sake of a sermon; rather, it is the very description of Scripture itself, even 700 years before it happened:

“Rejoice, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Your king is coming to you, righteous and having salvation is he; humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

What a glorious and beloved refrain, to meditate upon in our remembrance of that Palm Sunday procession and to take heart in for the Church’s life forever. What’s more!, consider the *context* of Zechariah 9:9, from which this refrain comes! The subtitle of the entire chapter is “Judgment on Israel’s Enemies”, and the verses following the well-known 9th verse about the King coming on the foal of a donkey declare,

“I will cut off the chariot ... and the war horse... and the battle bow... and he shall speak peace to the nations; his rule shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.”

Yes, *glory*, dominion, rule belongs to this King who comes in procession to the cross. And, the verses continue as the King appeals to those He rescues through the cross:

“As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free... Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; today I declare that I will restore to you double.”

These are not verses of suffering and shameful defeat; they are verses of conquering and glorious victory and of sharing the spoils... of ransom, rescue, redemption, the freedom to flee from bondage back to the safety of the stronghold of the Church of God... freed by the blood of the covenant, spilt – poured out – by the King who came to save. A *suffering* for Him, that He might gain *victory* for you and, now, distribute it to you in just as lowly and humble a form as He gained it for you.

Yes, he came lowly and humble, for his assigned mission was to win the victory through suffering – “He will crush your head, you will strike his heel”, the Lord warned the adversary. ‘He will win the victory through suffering, through the shedding of blood.’

Thus, even in this week when beneficiaries rightly remember and mourn our role as the cause of His suffering, nevertheless... meditation upon the Lord’s death, meditation in

the theology of the cross is a meditation upon his victory and ours, on account of the determination and intentionality of the one who set his face to Jerusalem, who was not ashamed of the cross, who did His Father's bidding, and thereby turned the cross of sorrow into a seat of glory.

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

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