

Palm Sunday

I take as my text from the Gospel of St. Matthew:

And Jesus stood before the governor: and the governor asked him, saying, Art thou the King of the Jews? And Jesus said unto him, Thou sayest. And when he was accused of the chief priests and elders, he answered nothing.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable unto Thee, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.

Today, as we celebrate Palm Sunday, or more properly, according to the Prayer Book, the Sunday next before Easter, commonly called Palm Sunday, we find in the Prayer Book that this is only one of two references to what has become an integral part of the Church Year.

Neither the Gospel nor the Epistle, or even the Collect, have anything to do with the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem less than a week before his Crucifixion, only the Second Lesson for Morning Prayer, from the 11th Chapter of St. Mark, records the account of his triumphal arrival in Jerusalem.

In the brief ceremony we used today for the *Blessing of the Palms*, the account of this event was taken from the 21st chapter of St. Matthew.

If we look at both Gospel passages from St. Matthew and the one from St. Mark, in the context of Holy Week, we can better understand the progression from triumphal entry to death on the Cross.

It is well to note that what Matthew and Mark describe is in a sense a reversal of our Lord's position, at this one time allowing himself to be openly proclaimed as the Messiah. Some Biblical commentators point out that, at this time, our Lord no longer had any fear of the political consequences of a revival of his popularity; indeed, the expectations of his supporters would only be raised momentarily before what was to be the finale of his earthly ministry.

In light of the events that were to transpire during Holy Week, this moment on Palm Sunday was the one bright spot. Its momentary triumphal ring could be attributed, to a great extent, to the presence in Jerusalem of so many Galileans who still remained faithful to Jesus. And, it was such a bold change in policy that, for a

moment, he won back many who had turned aside because of his reluctance to take the action they expected of a Messiah.

Jesus had traveled to Bethany from Jericho to arrive six days before the Passover. That would have been on Friday or Saturday, according to John's account. He would have rested from the long journey, and most probably have made preparations for the events ahead.

In a very straightforward manner, Matthew describes the events, and we see Jesus, the Messiah, riding into the city of Jerusalem on a colt of an ass, so chosen because it was a symbol of peace. He was deliberately fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah:

Tell ye the daughter of Sion, Behold, thy King cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass, and a colt the foal of an ass.

By making this public entry into Jerusalem, our Lord was testifying to the nation and to mankind that he was actually the Messiah promised by the Old Testament prophets, and the person by whom the Kingdom of God was to be established.

The crowds cheered, strewed branches of palms, and spread garments in his path; but their enthusiasm was only momentary; momentary because they could not understand that the kingdom Jesus had come to establish was a different kind of kingdom, a spiritual kingdom providing for an eternal life, not a material and temporal life.

Jesus entered Jerusalem as the Messiah, a different kind of Messiah. True, he had the power to force his kingship over the world, but that would not have resolved man's salvation.

The realization of Palm Sunday is that Jesus Christ is King, the true King, and, if we are willing to submit to him while on this earth, our reward will be eternal life with him in his Heavenly Kingdom.

As the King rode triumphantly into Jerusalem so many years ago, so we took our palms today in an ancient Christian custom, to wave in enthusiastic support; but where will we be tomorrow, and the next day, and on Good Friday?

Will we be like those joyous supporters who waved their palms and strew garments in the way in tribute to a victorious king, only when finding that he was not exactly

what they were expecting, to fade out of the picture so that by Good Friday they were mocking him, turning their backs on him, even shouting "Crucify Him"?

Or will we celebrate with him in the public testimony of his Messiahship, stand by him in the hard times, and agonize with him on Good Friday; then, on Easter Sunday, celebrate with him his victory over sin and death.

What happens when God doesn't live up to our expectations?

Are we like one of the crowd in Jerusalem who turned their backs and rejected the Saviour of the world?

Or, do we put our faith and trust in Jesus Christ, and let him effect a change in our lives, a change in our expectations from that of earthly kingdom to spiritual kingdom?

The choice, however we perceive it, is truly ours to make. God would have it no other way.

We began today with the celebration of Christ's joyous entry into Jerusalem, carrying our Palms into the church, waving them triumphantly, singing in praise of the King.

From that triumphant entry into Jerusalem, our focus changed with the reading of the first of the four Gospel accounts of the Passion of our Lord, the account from St. Matthew, following the ancient custom of reading the accounts in canonical order.

Now, we turn our attention to the purpose of our Lord's coming into the world, that is, to suffer death that we may live through his Resurrection. Our attention is turned to the ultimate sacrificial offering: the Lamb of God for the sins of the world.

In the Passion Gospels, it is clear that our Lord had been rejected by the Jewish leadership for more than just claiming to be the Messiah. They had seen other so-called messiahs, and, since they were expecting a different kind of Messiah than Jesus represented, they determined him to be a threat to their very existence. He could upset the delicate balance they had established with the Roman occupiers and undo their own special and lucrative relationships and position.

Moreover, Christ presented a clear threat to religious authority and the system that had been established. He was a threat to the Temple worship. If allowed to continue,

Jesus would have turned their world upside down.

In the Passion Gospels, it is quite clear that the charge of conspiring against the Roman government was not the real reason behind the Sanhedrin's action. Clearly, Jesus was in their eyes guilty of blasphemy, for which the punishment was death by stoning; in their eyes he was guilty of claiming to be equal with God, indeed of being God; but these charges alone would not sway a Roman governor.

Any sentence imposed by the Sanhedrin could not be carried out without Roman consent, and they knew that Pilate would never go along with a death sentence for blasphemy; therefore, they turned Christ's claim of Kingship against him for Pilate's benefit, distorting his claim of Kingship, and turning it into an earthly claim, rather than a spiritual claim.

As the trial before the Sanhedrin was a mockery of Jewish Law, so the trial of Jesus before Pilate was a mockery of normal Roman judicial inquiry and procedure; and, thus convicted and sentenced to death, our Lord is subjected to horrible bodily tortures and agony.

But, the deepest anguish for our Lord was not the physical pain, rather the spiritual suffering as he carried the weight of all human sin. He hung on the Cross alone and abandoned; even his closest disciples had fled.

Though tempted throughout his Passion, Jesus never faltered. As throughout his ministry, his trust in God never failed, and he was obedient to the Father to the death.

God's love for us was and is constant: he, in the Person of Jesus Christ came into the world because he loves us; he died on the Cross because he loves us; and he, the Son, continues to plead our cause before the Father in heaven because he loves us.

It was through this perfect obedience and love that Jesus won the victory, not just for himself, but for all of us who willingly accept him as Lord and Saviour; not just to say it, that Jesus is Lord and Saviour, but to give up our will, give up ourselves to him who gave up his life for us.

Our Lord endured not just a horribly painful physical death upon the Cross, but he also endured the spiritual pain of our sins, and for a moment in time, he experienced a separation from his Heavenly Father expressed in his cry from the Cross, *My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me.*

As we remember this week the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, his humiliation, his agony and pain, and finally his death on the Cross, let us join ourselves to his suffering by offering our lives as living sacrifices to him. We can do this by turning our focus from the temporal to the spiritual; by putting God first in our lives; by worshipping God through all that we do; and by opening our hearts to be a dwelling place for the Holy Spirit.

When all is put into perspective, so little is asked of us today for the promise of so great a reward.