

+ The word “triumph” has an interesting history, especially considered in the light of our Lord's Passion. In its earliest form, “triumph” described a series of ritual cheers or exclamations. This was, in ancient Italy, a method of solemn public applause, something like the thrice-repeated “Hurrah” which was once a feature of public life our own United States. By the time of Christ, the word *triumph* had acquired a narrow significance within the Roman Empire. It referred not merely to the cheer itself, but rather to a complex ritual procession bestowed as a religious honor on a victorious commander of the imperial legions. In order to qualify for such an honor, the Roman general had to have defeated an enemy of the state, inflicting so many casualties, taking so many prisoners, contributing so much an amount to the public treasuries, and finally receiving the official approbation of the Senate. Failure to receive this honor in the course of military service, especially if the conditions were met but not officially sanctioned by the Senate, was the supreme form of public disgrace; but to be voted a Roman Triumph was the mark of the highest achievement in the life of that city and culture which dominated the Mediterranean world during our Savior's earthly life.

Amidst the general celebration of the populace, lubricated by a generous distribution of gifts and a stop to the city's labor, representatives of the general's victorious army would parade into the city of Rome, escorting a train of wreath-bedecked cattle for sacrifice, notable captives chained and prepared for execution, and displays of wealth and treasure taken from the unfortunate conquered people of wherever. Artists were employed to create elaborate, portable depictions of great battles and sieges which had occurred in the course of the successful campaign. The procession made its way down the widest avenue of the ancient city, known as the *Via Sacra*, or Sacred Road, toward the ancient citadel of Rome, the Capitoline Hill, on which sat her most sacred shrine—the temple of Jupiter, Best and Greatest. At the rear of the parade came the victorious commander himself, dressed in the purple of Rome's ancient kings, astride the *quadriga*, the four-horsed chariot of her antique warriors, his face painted in red ochre to match the seated image of Jupiter in the temple. As he processed through the jubilant and adoring crowd along the Sacred Way to officiate at the sacrifices in the city's most hallowed precincts, a specially appointed slave stood by him on the chariot, whispering into his ear at prescribed intervals: *Memento mori*—Remember thy mortality.

The symbolism of the Roman Triumph is obvious enough. By his service to the State and her gods—a service of brutal conquest and acquisition which both enriched and extended the imperium of that mighty city on seven hills—the Roman victor purchased for himself, however briefly, a certain identification with or participation in divinity itself. Through toil, strife, and bloodshed, a man might ascend the heights of earth to sit enthroned, if only for a time, among the gods.

This is an old myth—as old as Eden's serpent, but fresh as yesterday's news—not only the social Darwinism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and Marxism and National Socialism of the 20<sup>th</sup>, but now that peculiarly disturbing “Trans-humanism” of our own time, which seeks in every way the conquest, if that were possible, of man's natural and divinely-appointed limitation. At all times and in every place this myth is sounded out or repackaged as a variant of a simple proposition: Do this thing, achieve this goal—always difficult, perhaps even horrific; cross this bound, and you will be a better self, you will self-actualize; you will be like God, knowing good and evil.

Today we begin Holy Week, that final stage of our Lenten pilgrimage toward Easter. Though today is called “Palm Sunday,” and we have remembered, at the beginning of our worship this morning, the “triumphal entry” of Christ into Jerusalem, yet the focus of this day and the week ahead is, as our reading from St. Matthew's gospel directs us, the Passion and Death of our Lord. Though

Christ first enters the city to applause and acclaim, His is a very different sort of triumph from that of the Caesars. His joyous entrance of David's city and His ascension of the temple mount is but the first stage of that sacred and terrible procession which leads at last to Golgotha, and we must, as the liturgy itself compels us, consider them together. It is specially instructive, I think, to consider the whole of the Passion (not only its beginnings of palms and Hosannas) as Christ's triumph—and to note the sharp contrast between the triumph of Christ and the triumph of the worldly man.

Jesus enters, like the Roman victor, into the holiest place, and both have come to officiate at a sacrifice. One offers the blood of bulls, and the blood of his enemies, and claims for himself a seat among the gods. Christ enters humbly; in "lowly pomp" according to the words of Henry Milman's hymn, he "rides on to die," to offer His blood—not as Man to claim His portion of Divinity, but as very God to seal forever His perfect identification with our mortal flesh. As Pilate observes, "Behold, the Man." Both victors are clad in purple, but the red on the face of Christ is not painted, and the crown on his head is not of laurels but of thorns. He does not parade with His soldiers, displaying the humiliation of his enemies. Christ's followers have abandoned Him; it is the soldiers who beat and scourge Him on His Sacred Road, the Way of Sorrow, and God goes on His way to death by the hand of His enemies yet for their sake—to save humanity that has set itself in futile and disastrous opposition to its Creator. There is no need here for "Memento mori"—every step, every breath, every second proclaims it. No exaltation waits for Jesus on Calvary but the grossly physical one of crucifixion, no seat in the height of heaven but only dereliction—"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken Me?" He crosses no boundary from earth to heaven, but rather, as the Apostles' Creed puts it, He descends into Hell.

We have the ability to view the whole of our Lord's Passion and Resurrection as a unity. Thus we understand His entrance into Jerusalem, amid jubilant throngs, as ironic yet poignant foreshadowing. The people cry "Hosanna"—God save us—and call on Jesus as the Son of David. They will later cry "Let him be crucified," and His Cross will bear the sarcastic legend, "King of the Jews." But save them—and us—He does, and for all the cruel mockery of His torturers Christ remains a King indeed, though His kingdom is so obviously unlike the empire of sinful men. We know and believe this, because we see His humiliation and death inseparably from the glory of His vindication on Easter morning. In short, we see the whole—Passion, Death, and Resurrection—as a triumph. Yet, today let us not lose sight of or forget that this triumph—Christ's victory of the powers of Hell, of Sin, Death, and Satan—still differs substantially from the victory which fallen man still seeks today—which is a robbery to be equal with God. The form and manner of Christ's exaltation *is* His humiliation. That name which is above all other names is the name of a Man, but a Man who was slandered, beaten, whipped, and driven out of the city to die with evildoers, because of His radical obedience to God and because of His intense love for a lost and rebellious humanity.

I had the opportunity, a couple of Wednesdays ago, to stumble through St. Paul's letter to the Philippians, from which our Epistle was taken this morning—specifically, the "Christ-hymn" which the Blessed Apostle quotes and which serves, I think, as the interpretive center of the whole letter. I argued the point, during the course of that Bible-study, that the Cross is central to Paul's theology, and that much of his pastoral concern in addressing heresies—whether Judaizing or Gnostic, antinomian or legalistic and hyper-ascetic—is because all of them are attempts to deny the power of that Cross, that is, of our Savior's obedient sacrifice to the Father, and of the perfect revelation of both God and Man that consists in Christ crucified. In Philippians, shortly before the passage we read this morning, Paul

writes: “To you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake;” and therefore, he goes on to say: “Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.”

Christ's Passion is not only a new definition of victory, of “triumph” as we know it. It is a new definition of humanity; of humanity, not in competition with, but in obedient and loving submission to God, in self-sacrificial charity for others, and even for the enemies of God, which we once were. It is the nature of this new humanity to arouse the anger and hostility of the ruler of this age. It is the nature of this new humanity to suffer and die for righteousness' sake; but if we have been joined to Christ in His death, sacramentally through the waters of Baptism, and actually through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit as we grow in grace and in humble obedience to our Father, then we expect also to participate in the victory of our Brother and Great High Priest, to taste finally and fully what we now receive, to quote another hymn of St. Thomas, *sub his figuris*, “Beneath these shadows mean.” Our Lenten journey began with *Memento mori*—Remember, O Man, that thou art dust. This Passiontide and Easter, as we meditate on the glory revealed in the Holy Cross of Jesus, let us be strengthened by His Holy Spirit which cries out in our ears, *Memento resurgere*—Remember, O Christian, thy Resurrection. Let this confidence and faith be our encouragement as we seek, like our King and Savior before us, to walk the Sacred Way which God has set before us, despising the shame—that is, abandoning selfish ambition and conceit, boasting, like our Lord and His apostles, in our weakness, giving of ourselves and looking out for the interests of others. This, in union with the precious blood of Christ, will be our acceptable service, and this will be our triumphal entry into the New Jerusalem, the city of our God and King. + Amen.