

+In the name of the Triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen+

A word to the wise; you never, ever want to go grocery shopping with me. I have perfected a skill rarely seen in the American male, and it is unlikely to be repeated for several generations to come. No matter the store, no matter the day, no matter it be self-service, regular line, or express lane; and even if every register in the store is open and humming with precision, I will follow the slowest, stalled convoy to be found; the wrong procession. You need to know what parade you are in!!

Today is Palm Sunday, so perhaps we should say, you need to know whose parade you are following! It is striking to realize that the Evangelists recount this event as the starting point of the most powerful drama in history, and each takes nearly a quarter of their Gospel to draw out what it means for all who follow the trail. This begins with projected hopes of a king like Judas Maccabeus who drove out invaders, and closes with a king who weeps over his own city/people and dies in order to bring all of us life. We need to know what parade we are selecting to join for this week which we call ‘HOLY’.

It is vital to see how the reading from today’s Gospel fits into Matthew’s story of Jesus, and even more what that story has to do with us. Shakespeare, in his play about Henry V, has the king urge on his soldiers in battle with the cry, “Once more unto the breach dear friends, once more or close up the wall with our English dead.” Matthew, by taking us into Jesus’ triumphal entry to Jerusalem, could very well be showing how our Lord steps into the gaps and broken walls of both history and human lives to bring peace of the quality our world rarely knows. Jesus’ arrival in the sacred city, as his presence to us, will be met with either mediocre notice or heartfelt appreciation, but it dare not be ignored.

Let us open the story to a wider panorama. This is actually a snippet and the beginning of Matthew’s telling of what we traditionally call Palm Sunday. Notice there are no palms mentioned here. In fact, only John records palms being used. They were a nationalistic symbol and loaded with expectation about establishing a new political order. But this King, appearing on a colt, will seek a completely different kind and level of loyalty. The Romans greatly distrusted the use of palms and even more the crowds that used them. Trajan, an Emperor commented, “When people gather together for a common purpose-whatever name we may give them and whatever function we assign—they soon become political.” In other words, ‘they will turn on you.’ Consider what would have been happening at the opposite gate across the city. Pilate with full regalia and signs of power would have been met with pomp and honor. Roman power would stand out like a sore thumb. If you want to get a sense of what Jerusalem would be like at this moment of the year, think of the High Point Furniture Market; restaurants slammed, hotels full, houses vacated and rented for a premium, traffic backed up, leisure gone, and full crowd control by legionnaires. Tacitus, the historian wrote, “The Romans rob, they slaughter, they plunder, and they call it ‘Empire. Where they make a wasteland, they call it Pax Romana-Peace.” Instead these verses provide quite a different view and contrast. For this access to the city there are cloaks on the road rather than palms, a donkey rather than chariot with four horses, a multitude of followers far greater

than the original twelve, and perhaps most telling, “hosanna in the highest heaven” and “Blessed is the one who comes in the Name of the Lord”. (Where did you first hear those words—birth narrative.) Matthew is proclaiming that the truest and only lasting peace over the world is God’s rule over his people, and that rule will have a quality nothing and no one else can bring. As Gregory Palamas, the orthodox saint wrote, “Your king will not frighten those who look upon him; he is not an overbearing kind of person... He does not come with a bodyguard, an armed escort, or soldiers demanding taxes and tribute... This king alone is just, and in justice he saves.”

The message here is clear; to follow this king is to deny that any earthly prince, power, establishment has the right to demand total allegiance. Jesus is the manifestation to an all too violent and evil world that the culture of buying and selling souls will crumble, and that mercy and forgiveness are more powerful than dog eat dog perspectives. Is it any wonder that Jesus’ appearance, teachings, his love for the broken and weak, cleansing of the Temple would cause so much anxiety and distress for the powers of his time?! He threatens to unhinge their control, both in his day and in ours as well.

Now fit our morning’s text upon that prelude. With these stark contrasts Jesus comes to our world(s) and laments over the city of God’s presence and cleanses the Temple. The Temple, the place of God’s presence—not the only place, but a very special place to withdraw from the pollution of the culture and world, to offer sacrifice, and to be in God’s presence, must now be cleansed. Jesus, the very Word made flesh becomes the new Temple. What is bad is removed and replaced by ultimate good. It is terribly easy, is it not, to replace or substitute in our own souls and hearts the power and place of God with something far less demanding or more agreeable?

What does it mean for us to proclaim that Jesus is King in a day and age when kings are figureheads and political figures make a mockery of integrity promising what they cannot deliver? Matthew would suggest that this King will reign forever (beyond time), and eternally (beyond our ability to place limits on him). Jesus is King not in terms of how long we think we need him. He claims the whole of creation and all things as his, not until we are done with them. He calls us to divest of what is passing and unworthy of our status as God’s children. He does not merely comfort us but prods and calls and pokes at our sin so that we can be renewed and made whole. If we follow this story, and for that matter all of the writers in the New Testament, regarding this episode, it becomes clear that God in Christ is not nearly as concerned about our comfort and pleasure as about our being set free from bondage to wrong commitments, idolatrous self-enveloped attitudes, and half committed lives. C. S. Lewis once commented, “Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important.” The reason it cannot be moderately important is that God gave everything, for the whole of creation, because we are ultimately important to Him!!! The Epistle today shows us what real triumph looks like. Jesus’ emptying of his rightful glory in order to redefine victory and redefine what it means to be human. It is not to stand in competition with God or one another, but in solidarity.

One remaining aspect later in the narrative is striking in its simplicity and depth. As with the event of the death of Lazarus, Jesus weeps over Jerusalem. The word is closer to lamenting which is different from merely crying or a moment of sadness. To lament is to grieve over ‘what might have been and has now been lost’. It is about lost opportunity and mourning tinged with love and hope. Jesus has a moment of grief over his homeland and its blindness about what would really bring about shalom/peace of God—the irony of the name—Jerusalem, Abode of Peace. “If only you knew what things belong to your peace...”. That would be found not in work or effort, but in

recognizing the King and the kind of peace he brings. Jesus’ tears formed a river of love, compassion, and heartbreak flowing between him and the city. Let us be clear that Jerusalem is not simply about a geographical location we know as specific place in the near middle east. It is about a condition in the world of ignorance and blindness to Christ’s kingship. It’s about our ignorance of “the things that make for peace” and our failure to recognize God’s visitation and presence. It is about place after place-Nigeria, Boulder—the list continues. It’s about and the destructiveness of fear and hate, politically and socially. Jesus sees it all and he weeps, not out of anger but out of love and hope for what might be.

I know some of you have wept tears driven by loss, struggle, and disenchantment. You and I have had moments when perhaps we have cried ourselves to a dry place where the world has exhausted our resources. We yearn for wholeness and a fresh look at life that is not tinged by hatred or anger or disappointment in others or in ourselves. We are invited today to offer those to him who has cried with us in our darkest moments, as well as his own city, and yet still remains King who is coming to redeem our world and bring it hope. The parade begins today. Let us join in it. Amen+