

Palm Sunday / March 24, 2024

Matthew 21:1-9

“And when He entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, ‘Who is this?’ And the crowds said, ‘This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee.’”

Jesus, the Prophet from Nazareth in Galilee

When Jesus entered Jerusalem Sunday of Holy Week, He received a welcome fit for a king. It was not much of a welcome for an earthly king. His chariot was a humble donkey. His red carpet was a path lined with branches and garments the pilgrims placed before Him. But it was a welcome for a king who came not to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many. It was a welcome in accordance with the words the angel spoke to Mary, saying, “You shall bear a son and you shall call His name Jesus...And the Lord God will give to Him the throne of His Father David.” It was a welcome in fulfilment of the words the Spirit spoke through the prophet Zechariah, saying, “Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is He, humble and mounted on a donkey.”

The pilgrim crowd that flocked to Jerusalem from the regions of Galilee and Judea, recognized Jesus as the Prophet from Nazareth and welcomed Him as the Son of David. We join their song today and say, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!” With a deeper insight, given by the word and working of the Holy Spirit with the passage of time, we receive Him also as our God and Saviour. Jesus, the King of heaven, in whom salvation is offered for all and given freely and fully in time and eternity, to all who believe.

However, not everyone welcomed Him or saw Him in such glowing terms. The keepers of the temple, the Pharisees and Herodians saw Him as a trouble maker. He was their antagonist. They feared He would cause a rebellion and they would lose their temple and place of leadership in Jerusalem. On the one hand, there was a crowd of pilgrims welcoming Him into the city as the King of Israel. On the other hand, there was a crowd of enemies, who desired His downfall. The pilgrim’s hopes would be dashed. Jesus would be rejected, humiliated and crucified as the failed King of the Jews. At the beginning of the next week they would lament, “But we had hoped He would be the one to redeem Israel.” Jesus’ enemies would rejoice. His friends and followers would weep and lament.

Jesus’ enemies were offended by the crowd of pilgrims and their children welcoming Him as the prophet from Nazareth. Could anything good come from Nazareth! Indeed, something good came from Nazareth. Jesus the son of the carpenter, the son of Mary, the Son of God. The crowds that welcomed Him didn’t fully appreciate just who they were welcoming, even as the temple crowd didn’t fully realize who they were rejecting. More than a would be king. More than an earthly king, Jesus is the King who humbled Himself to the point of death on the cross that all who receive Him in simple faith would receive power to become children of God. We begin Holy Week, remembering the faith of the pilgrims and especially their children— so trusting and pure. We share their faith and more, for we receive Him not only as the Prophet from Nazareth, but as our Saviour, God and King.

Jesus spent the last days of His public ministry in Jerusalem, teaching the people and instructing His disciples. Jesus taught publicly in the temple courts. Through His knowledge of the scriptures, understanding and wisdom, He revealed Himself as the successor of David, heir to his kingship and the promise of an everlasting kingdom. The Lord blessed David’s son Solomon with wisdom to confirm him as the heir to his father’s throne. Jesus showed Himself greater than Solomon, by expressing a greater wisdom and deeper insight into the heart of humans and the mind of God. During Holy Week His opponents tested Him, trying to trap Him in His words and condemn Him. In the end it was they who were caught. His opponents were left speechless and the people delighted in His words. His words are truth and life. He has the words of eternal life!

The Herodians and Pharisees tried to trap Him with the payment of taxes. They asked whether it was right to pay tax to Ceasar or not? The people hated Ceasar and his taxes. They reasoned the people would turn on Him, if He said it was right to pay the tax. On the other hand, if He said they should not pay, they could accuse Him to the Romans for teaching rebellion against Ceasar. It was the perfect trap. Perhaps they were puzzled when he requested a coin, asked whose name and image were on it. Ceasar’s of course. They were stunned when He answered, “Give to Ceasar what belongs to Ceasar and to God what belongs to God.” Jesus caught them with their own trap. The people rejoiced. Through wisdom Jesus shows Himself the heir to David’s eternal throne, our Saviour and King.

During Holy Week, Jesus instructed His disciples in the signs of the times, so they and we would be prepared for the troubles that would precede His return as King and Lord of all. He warned of wars, famines, natural disasters and persecutions. He warned in advance, so that when hardship and suffering came, they would remember His words, look to Him for strength and remain strong in faith. He warned so we would believe His words and draw near to Him in faith in times of trouble. His most significant warning was the destruction of Jerusalem, which happened forty years later. This sign confirmed to them and us that all His words will come to pass. Most importantly, His words assure us that no matter what the times and what we experience in life, He can be trusted to bring us through all things and bring our faith to fulfillment in eternal life.

Holy Week leads to the cross on which Jesus suffered for our sins and died for our forgiveness. The King who was welcomed Sunday was crucified and buried Friday. He rested in the grave on the Sabbath, before coming out of the tomb as the Eternal King the following Sunday. During Holy Week we remember Jesus' wisdom. His words of watchfulness. His suffering and death. We remember, so that we may receive strength and encouragement as we deal with the signs of the times in our lives. We watch for the signs to remember Jesus' words about the His return, the fulfillment of our faith and the renewal of all things. These things (perplexing to understand, painful to experience) remind us of Jesus' promise to be with us always, His promise to return and the promise of eternal life in the presence of God; where sin, sorrow, suffering and death are no more.

On Friday the prophet from Nazareth, welcomed as the "King of Israel" on Palm Sunday, was crucified as the "King of the Jews." Jesus' death is the most profound event in human history, since humanity fell into sin. His death foretold by the prophets and by Himself in the days before it occurred, was accompanied by strange happenings and synchronous events. The sky was darkened as He called out to His Father to receive His spirit. The earth was shaken by a violent earthquake when He breathed His last. Many of the righteous dead were raised and were seen in Jerusalem. The pagan centurion who stood beneath Jesus' cross exclaimed, "This man really was the Son of God." The temple curtain, separating the Most Holy Place from the Holy Place, was torn in two, from top to bottom. These things testified to an event of profound meaning and eternal significance.

Before He died, Jesus prayed for the forgiveness of the people who crowded together beneath His cross, cursing Him. That was most unusual. People on crosses didn't bless their tormenters, they cursed them. His words created faith in the heart of one of the men crucified beside Him. He prayed, "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus assured him of his salvation saying, "Today you will be with me in paradise." Jesus' words are power and life even in the suffering of death. Jesus cried out, "It is finished," and returned His spirit to His Father in peace. What was finished was not simply His life. What was finished was the work He had been born to accomplish, the reconciliation of the creation to the Creator.

In the letter to the Colossians St. Paul wrote about the reconciliation Jesus accomplished through his death on the cross. He said, "God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, things in heaven, things on the earth and things under the earth—making peace through the blood of His cross." Jesus fulfilled His purpose and reconciled the creation to the Creator. Jesus' death means that through faith in Him, we are personally reconciled to our Creator and in Jesus have access to Him. Because of Jesus' death, when our time to die comes, the Father will also receive our spirits into His hands in peace.

Jesus' work of reconciliation will be fulfilled when He returns and gives us a share in His resurrection to a new and eternal life. The earth will again shake and bring forth the dead, made righteous in Christ. The heavens will roll up like a scroll! All things will be made new! Jesus' death and resurrection are the most significant events in the human experience, especially in the experience of those who believe. His death took away our sin. His resurrection assures us that God accepted His sacrifice and accepts all who receive Him as Saviour. His resurrection is the first-fruits of those who believe. His death is our death. His resurrection is our resurrection.

We begin Holy Week with the pilgrim crowd welcoming Jesus as the Son of David. We join in their welcome, but with the perspective of time and through the word and by the working of the Holy Spirit, we receive Him as more than a prophet from Nazareth. Can anything good come from Nazareth? Indeed, something good has come from Nazareth. Something great has come from Nazareth and from the heart of God, Jesus our Saviour and King. "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!" God bless us with faith to receive Him as He comes to us by the Spirit in word and sacrament. God keep us in faith until the day He returns as King of Kings and welcomes us into His presence in the resurrection to eternal life. In Jesus' Name. Amen