

Palm Sunday / March 28, 2021

John 12:32

“And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

The beginning of Holy Week is known as Palm Sunday or the Sunday of the Passion. It marks the beginning of the final week of Jesus' public ministry. It was a week that began with a triumphal entry into the city, with Jesus being hailed by the pilgrim crowd as “the Son of David” and receiving a welcome fit for a king. It was a week that ended with another crowd calling for His death by crucifixion and shouting, “We have no king but Caesar.” It was a week like no other since the Lord God created the heavens and the earth. It was a week in which God began His work of creating all things new, through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

On the first day of the week Jesus was received into the city along a path of palm branches. His path led to the temple, where He drove out the merchants and money changers and denounced the temple keepers, for turning it into a “den of thieves.” On the last day of the week the temple of Jesus’ body lay still in a tomb, having been lifted up on a cross the previous day, between two thieves. In human terms it seemed a calamitous turnaround, as great expectations were reduced to ashes and dust. People who followed Him were shocked! But it came as no surprise to Jesus. He knew it had to be that way, in order that the ruler of this world would be cast out and He would begin to draw all humans to Himself and to His heavenly Father, through the atonement of His cross.

Our gospel begins with some unnamed Greeks approaching Philip with a request: “Sir, we wish to see Jesus?” Philip relayed the message to Andrew and the two of them told Jesus. All that is fine, but it seems odd that we are not told whether those Greeks saw Jesus or not. Their request was important to Jesus, not so much for them, but for Himself. He said, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” Their request was a sign to Him that the time had come for Him to be raised up on the cross. He referred to it as His glorification, but being raised on a cross was not something people associated with being glorified. Quite the contrary, there was nothing more inglorious, hideous and awful than crucifixion. If ever there was a form of judicial death devised in the bowels of hell, it was crucifixion. It was designed not simply to put to death, but to provide the maximum amount of pain and extend suffering as long as possible. It was a form of public humiliation, as the condemned were stripped naked and lifted up for everyone to see. There was nothing glorious about crucifixion!

Yet for Jesus this was how He would come into His kingdom. This would be the means by which His Father glorified Him and be the means by which He would glorify His Father’s name. Jesus knew it would be this way, because that is what the Holy Spirit had spoken through the prophets. Isaiah sang, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned each to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.” Jesus knew He was the one on whom the Lord would lay our iniquity. He knew He would bear the iniquity of our sin, by being lifted above the earth on a cross.

In the third chapter of this gospel, Jesus had a conversation with a Pharisee named Nicodemus. In the course of their conversation, He spoke of the cross saying, “For as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life.” Jesus’ glory is His love for human beings, which moved Him to sacrifice His life on the cross for our salvation in the forgiveness of sin. Jesus glorifies the Father, by making Him known through the cross as God of love and mercy. God is glorified when we receive the gospel message and believe that He loves us and gave His only begotten Son for our salvation. Everyone who believes in Him has eternal life!

Yet there was nothing glorious about the cross. The cross was and is a hideous torture device. Of course, we don’t think of that when we see a cross. That’s not why we decorate our homes, or adorn our bodies and buildings with crosses. The cross for believers is the most profound symbol of God’s love. On the cross Jesus suffered and died for our pardon, that we might have peace with God through the forgiveness of our sins and the promise of new life in eternity. In the ancient world before Jesus transformed it into a symbol of forgiveness and life, people turned away from the cross in disgust, as a sign of condemnation and death. The cross repelled people in the same way as opposite ends of a magnet push each other apart. Jesus accomplished the most amazing transformation in history, when He transformed the cross from a stumbling block that repelled people, into a magnet by which He draws people to Himself as Saviour.

Jesus said, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” The cross is the magnet by which Jesus draws people to Himself. The drawing power of the cross is the forgiveness which Jesus extends and offers all to receive. The power of the cross, is the sacrifice by which Jesus fully paid our debt and took away the guilt of our sin. When we see a cross, we don’t see a cruel form of judicial death. We don’t see a symbol of

the depths of human depravity in our ability to mete out the most godless forms of suffering and death. When we see a cross, we see Jesus. When we see a cross, we see God's love in giving His Son to bear our sins. When we see a cross, we see God's forgiving heart. God draws us to His heart through the cross and speaks a word of forgiveness. The cross is the paramount symbol of God's love expressed in Christ's sacrifice for our sin. When we see a cross, we hear Jesus say, "Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest." In the cross we see God's glory in forgiveness and we bask in its light.

A person wouldn't naturally think of a cross as being a light source, not physically or metaphysically. As a symbol, the cross was first and foremost, a symbol of the darkness of death. There was no hope in a Roman cross! No one got off a Roman cross alive. The Roman soldiers didn't want to offend the Jewish leaders by leaving bodies on the cross during Passover. As a favour to them, they broke the legs of the two thieves so they would die, but Jesus appeared to have already died. Appearances can be deceiving and the Romans didn't like to be deceived. They made sure Jesus was dead, by driving a spear through His side. No one got off the cross alive. The Romans didn't intend it for good, but that's something very good for us to know. Jesus really died on the cross, which means He really atoned for our sin. The glorious light of the cross is the forgiveness which Jesus earned through His death and gives as a free gift to all who believe.

The cross shows us the darkness of human sin, our sin. It was for our sin that Jesus suffered and died. The cross shows the darkness of human sin, our sinfulness by which we do the most inhuman things to other human beings. We call them inhuman acts, but sadly inhuman acts are very human. What other creature could put members of its own species to death in such a cruel manner as on a cross? What other species treats its own kind with the casual cruelty, with which humans commonly treat each other every day? What other creature can dispense misery and death to millions of its own kind and act like such things didn't matter, or are in some way justified?

The cross reveals the darkness of human sin, but because of Jesus, it shines a beacon of hope. The cross shows there is hope for human beings, by showing us Jesus. Jesus is our hope. He gives us peace in our relationship with the Creator through the sacrifice of His body on the cross. He gives us forgiveness and the power to walk in newness of life in time. He gives us the hope of a new and eternal life, in which the darkness of sin and the power of death are forever gone. Jesus draws us to Himself through the forgiveness of His cross, so He might bring us to the Father in peace!

Jesus was lifted up from the earth and raised high on the cross, so that He would draw all people to Himself through the grace of forgiveness. Jesus was lifted up from the earth and raised high on the cross, so that all who believe in Him would receive forgiveness of sin in time and the promise of life in eternity. Jesus was lifted up from the earth and raised high on the cross, so that one day we too would be raised up from the earth and brought into God's presence. On that day we will behold His glory in eternal life. May Jesus preserve our faith by His grace and bring us to that glorious day! In His Name. Amen