

In Nomine Jesu

A SUNDAY OF JOY AND A SUNDAY OF SORROW

Our sermon for this Palm Sunday (called Passion Sunday in congregations that have not recovered the fullness of the Holy Week services), is taken from our inspired readings, as we hear this translation,

As for you also, because of the blood of My covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit (Zechariah 9:11).

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

This is a Sunday of joy and a Sunday of sorrow. We, remembering in our actions, the crowd that came to meet Jesus and the crowd that followed Him into the once Holy City, we were called to remember that we too need to cry, "Hosanna!" "Save Now!" Each year, we rejoice with the ancient faithful in this day's reenactment. Even so, annually we sorrow with the same as we remember that Jesus had to "Save Now" by shedding His blood on the ignominious cross. This Sunday begins a yearly week of remembrance that shows us that we cannot by our own good works, thoughts, words or deeds save ourselves from sin; its end, death; and its eternal punishment, the waterless pit.

This appears to be the 2,600th anniversary year of the day when God, through the prophet Zechariah, set the biblical stage for Palm Sunday celebrations. His words foreshadow that which Jesus came to do. Guided by the Spirit of the Living God, he declared:

As for you also, because of the blood of My covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit (Zechariah 9:11).

This is the annual Sunday to remember that the blood of the New Covenant replaced the blood of the Old Covenant. That which the catechized and rightly believing faithful have received at Christ's Table for almost 20 centuries has replaced that which was shed to point the catechized and rightly believing ones in Israel to the Christ Who, for them, was to come. This day is an annual remembrance of God's ancient promises that have been fulfilled in the Christ, Jesus of Nazareth.

That this day shows up every year is good for the faithful, for the Church, for you. So much may be taught from that which is enacted and heard in Palm Sunday's Divine services. A single repetition, or even a few, would not be enough to put it all forth into your ears. Some of our number have, in the flesh, in churches across the country, participated in the faith-bolstering patterns of this day for more than nine decades.

The tradition of this congregation fits within ancient patterns. We entered into the Nave (the seating place of the Ark of the Church) with palm fronds. Our actions were informed by the Old Covenant rites used for the celebration of the Feast of Booths (Lev. 23:40). Those lay behind the triumphal entrance procession of Jesus which is declared through the Palm Sunday Gospel readings.

As we processed, holding our palm leaves, we sang the Church's 1,200-year-old victory Hymn. A bishop named Theodulf, more than two centuries before the Church was divided into East and West (let alone split into all the denominations into which she devolved following the Reformation) composed it in the Latin language. He did so during his confinement by the successor to Charlemagne during the years A.D. 818-

821. He was accused of plotting to overthrow that man, Louis I, also called Louis the Pious. (That is kind of ironic if you think about it).

At the end of his incarceration, or just after, Theodulf died. It appears that occurred through poisoning. The Holy Roman Emperors of the united Church era did not waiver in enforcing capital justice. (Consider that when you might be tempted to think we live in one of the worst eras of political persecution of the faithful confessors of Christ and His Church).

All Glory, Laud, and Honor became a standard for Palm Sunday processions not long after its composition. Now you know a bit more of its composer's background. Out of his tragedy came forth a hymn of praise. That may help you in future years to remember that this is a Sunday of joy and a Sunday of sorrow. The hymn is joy filled, the composer's life ended sadly. That reality was enacted in Churches, for years, as medieval rites prescribed. They called for seven-boy choirs to sing the first four stanzas from high points in the south ends of churches. This appears to have been done to recall Theodulf's imprisonment (Precht).

As indicated earlier, there is so much that can be taught concerning Palm Sunday that annual repetition is very helpful. This day also serves to prepare us for the Church's services each Holy Week. Truly, this week is given to us to center us on all the recorded events concerning the Passion of our Lord. The days build to the complete fulfillment of this ancient divine promise:

As for you also, because of the blood of My covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit (Zechariah 9:11).

That text has led the faithful, for 65 40-year generations, to consider how God would, did, and continues to fulfill His Word for those Who remain faithful to His calling them by His Name. We hear the beginning of the completion of its prophecy in the day's narratives. Twice each Palm Sunday we hear of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The final prophetic fulfillment needed for you to be saved from the waterless pit began on the first day of the week that led to Jesus' death in your sins, and the sins of all the people in the world for all time.

The prophet Zechariah, inspired by the Living God, first spoke and wrote God's promises to a people to whom God had given new hope. Their earthly captivity, punishment on account of their unrepented sins, had ended. They had been given the Emperor's authority to restore and consecrate First Temple that had been destroyed 70 years earlier.

As this congregation's building plans progress, we can perhaps better imagine this year their joy in the sixth century B.C. at being allowed to return to their homeland with official sanction to rebuild their place of worship. Over seven decades, they had been unable to offer sacrifices to the Lord – for sin, for cleansing, for thanksgiving, for peace, for fellowship and so on.

They were soon to be able to participate fully in the liturgy of their faith. What joy this must have brought them to have their “church” rising from the ashes of their sorrow that had been spread over so many decades. In the midst of their building campaign, the Word of the Lord came to them through Zechariah. God said to His people,

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion, shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem. Behold your King comes to you, righteous and [having] salvation, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt, the son of a she-ass (Zechariah 9:9).

In the midst of our building planning, this time of joy as God has moved us past another threshold, that Word also comes to us. It reminds us that King Jesus comes to us, to His people today, in building a legacy in Christ-crucified. He is moving among us to raise up that which will be to His glory. He comes to us with His Word and Sacraments that we might look back to the faithful of old even as we anticipate the faithful whom He will bring among us in the future.

God's Word calls for exceeding joy among the people whom He plants upon His holy mountain. In the Old Covenant, that was on Mount Zion, where He moved the faithful to found Holy Jerusalem. In the New Covenant, God's Holy Mountain can be found anywhere His Word is purely proclaimed and His Sacraments are rightly administered.

You, dear ones in Christ, are part of the New Covenant daughter of Zion. He has planted you here. He did so that He might unite you under one King, who is the One who is eternally right with the Father. God placed you in this part of His house on earth, that He might continue to grant you His Salvation.

He who once entered the former only Holy City on earth in humble estate – that is what the text is truly describing – still enters His joyful Holy City all over the world. He still comes humbly – veiled under the means of Word, water, bread and wine. Here is King Jesus – in the proclamation of

the Law that shows you your sin, and the Gospel that declares to you your Savior!

Since the Fall of Adam, God has, for the benefit and protection of those whom He wills to save, chosen to use humble means His gifts to bestow. Even when He chose to complete all that was necessary for your salvation, declaration of rightness, and “holification” into Christlikeness, He did so through earthly elements. That is reinforced when you sing so often here that which you regularly confess in the cross-cultural, cross-denomination Creeds, namely that He humbled Himself to be born of a Virgin. Do you continue to reflect on what that truly means? The Apostle did, when he wrote this long sentence to the Church long ago at Philippi:

*[Hold] this mind in all of you, that which was also in Christ Jesus, Who being, in the outward display of an inner reality, God existed, [did] not robbery consider it to become worthy with God, but Himself He emptied, [the] form of [a] slave having received, in likeness of men becoming.*¹

There you hear of God veiled in human flesh. He did so to become one with you. He became fully Man while remaining fully God to bear your sins without sin in Himself. As true Man and true God He died in your sins. If you do not believe you are a sinner who continues to sin, you do not need the God/Man, King Jesus of the Scriptures. If you know and continue to confess that you still sin, know that He rode in, and still comes, to save you!

The Second Person of the Holy Trinity emptied Himself of His eternal glory to save you from the waterless pit. Jesus comes to rescue you

¹ *Philippians 2:5-7.*

from all the enemies who would wrest His blood-bought salvation from you. Zechariah's Word to the ancients has meaning for you, O sinner-saint, even as he continues to declare:

I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim, and the horse from Jerusalem. And the battle bow shall be cut off. And He shall speak shalom (peace) to the goyim (nations). And His rule will be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth (Zechariah 9:10).

King Jesus' message is of peace in salvation – for all peoples. He rules throughout the earth through humble means. May His rule continue in you this most holy of weeks in the Church Year.

The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus

Palmarum, One-year Series
John 12: 12-19; Zechariah 9:9-12; Philippians 1:15-23; Matthew 21:1-9
April 9, 2017

Pastor Michael A. Morehouse

Solí Deo Glória