

Vespers Homily

Palm Sunday

March 20, 2016

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

Mark 11:1-11

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Here is a strange question. What would have happened if the events of this day had never taken place? What if there had been no palm-waving and cloak-spreading, no cries of Hosanna? What if Jesus had never come to Jerusalem; just continued to walk the dusty roads, to visit the little villages, and to climb to mountains of Galilee? What if Jesus remained simply a prophet?

Picture an aged Jesus, a beloved old prophet, on His yearly round of visits to those villages, teaching the same message, preaching the same words, healing the children of the children He had healed. He would have become part of the yearly routine – “Here comes Jesus; it must be July.” His words, His great sermons and teachings, would become routine; and slowly, very slowly, they would lose their power and their significance. There would be no more Sermons on the Mount or Sermons in the Plain, no crowds of five thousand. Even His healing ministries would become expected, not the source of wonder.

The palm-waving, the cloak-spreading, and the Hosanna-crying do occur. We need to recognize that there is nothing spontaneous, nothing out of control about these events; they are all part of the trajectory of Jesus’ life, a part of the unfolding plan of God for His

creation. They are the culmination of the Incarnation that had been proclaimed to shepherds and Magi. It is all one.

When I retired as Rector of Christ Church, we moved from the Rectory and I vacated my office; I gave away a lot of books. We simply did not have space for them in our retirement home. Some of them were given to people who might make use of them, some to the library, and some I left for a successor. I really miss them. Most of those books are on the shelves in the hallway of the Gabard Building. I am slowly liberating them, with the rector's permission, of course. One of the first books to be liberated was one I purchased from the bookstore at Nashotah House, my seminary.

Nashotah House began in the lake district of southern Wisconsin, just west of Milwaukee, in 1840. It began as a mission to the Indians of the region; however, one night, the Indians simply vanished, or so the story goes, and the Episcopal priests found themselves with a mission to the Scandinavian farmers in the area. Undaunted, they carried on.

Much of Nashotah has changed very little over time. It is a physically beautiful campus in the midst of farmland, situated between two lakes. *Nashotah* is an Indian word for "twin lakes," perhaps the only reminder of the departed tribes. The Chapel of Saint Mary the Virgin was built in the 1850's in a Romanesque style; it is filled with Oberammergau-carved wooden saints and stained glass, uplifted with the haunting scent of a century and a half of incense. The liturgy is magnificent.

The campus itself is called the "garth." It's shaded by huge old elms. In the middle of the garth is a bell tower housing Michael, a huge bell that chimes the time for seminary services and events. On the east side of the garth is a cloister, housing for single students, with a covered walkway to the chapel. On the north side is a classroom building, and on the south side is the library. The library was built in the 1890's in the Gothic style, all gray stone with heavy mullioned

windows and a few gargoyles on the roof line. The library's lower level houses the "stacks," a wonderland of books and a rare book room. Over the years quite a few graduates have bequeathed their libraries to the House. The scent of old books is wonderful.

A short distance to the west is the seminary bookstore, a real bookstore selling real books. Having visited the bookstores of several other seminaries, I can truly say that is not always the case. The bookstore at Nashotah is a paradise for browsers.

One of the books I bought at the Nashotah bookstore, and retrieved from the Gabard Building shelves, was a commentary on the gospel of Saint Mark, part of the International Critical Commentary series. The writer was the Rev. Ezra P. Gould, STD, professor of New Testament Literature and Language at the Divinity School of the Protestant Episcopal Church, Philadelphia, long since defunct. The first impression was in 1896. Nashotah House always strives to be current. Perhaps it was the spell of ancient elms, historic architecture, saints, and stained glass that influenced me to buy it.

It's unusual to find a nineteenth-century book of commentary on the gospels that isn't written by a German theologian. They absolutely dominated the field, and, it must be admitted, their scholarship was superb. English and American theologians, whose scholarship was equally superb, were completely overwhelmed. Professor Gould's work is an example of that sort of excellent scholarship that went unrecognized for years. He makes full, creative use of translation from the Greek and, of most interest, gives a different interpretation of the events of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem.

Gould points out that Jesus had told his Disciples that He would go to Jerusalem to meet His fate, to die, but He enters Jerusalem to be greeted by people who hail Him as the coming King of Israel, the successor of David. Jesus accepts that acknowledgement, even though He had denied it before. Once that claim of kingship is made and acknowledged, Jesus proceeds, as always, with His spiritual

work. There is no change. In Mark He simply enters the Temple, looks around, and leaves; no great scene of driving out money-changers and livestock.

It is the unfolding of God's plan.

Jesus is consistent in what he does and absolutely inconsistent with the worldly concept of kings. Jesus must have known that any Messianic claim of kingship made in Jerusalem would provoke and pose a threat to the Jewish leaders and to the Romans and would mean certain death, but His death would mean the establishment of the ideal that been given witness in His life, a proof of how God would have us live. Jesus' faith and trust in God are absolute, and He would use only absolutely spiritual means in the accomplishment of His end; hence He makes no resistance in the Garden of Gethsemane and is silent before the Sanhedrin and before Pilate.

Everything points to the fact that Jesus deliberately used the enthusiasm of the multitude for the purpose of His entry into Jerusalem, making it the means of the proclamation of His messianic kingship. It was necessary that He be proclaimed, publicly, as king, not just a prophet. Then, by simply remaining the Jesus of the dusty roads and tiny villages, with no change to His persona or His actions, by failing to act as a king would be expected to act, Jesus revolutionizes the idea of kingship: "He who desires to be first, let him be least and servant of all."

In His Holy Name.