

VESPERS HOMILY
PALM SUNDAY 2017

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

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
Triumphant and victorious is He,
Humble and riding on an ass,
On a colt, the foal of an ass.”

Today, sometimes called The Sunday of the Passion, otherwise called Palm Sunday, signals the end of the Lenten season, the season of preparation. The prelude is finished; the great drama is about to unfold. Jesus takes His first steps toward Jerusalem, the Temple and the Cross.

His entry is made in a procession of His Disciples and others who have heard of His works, all crying aloud:
“Hosannah to the Son of David!”
“Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the lord.”
“Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor, David.”

It’s a plea for help. In Hebrew it’s “Hoshi an Nah,” help us now. This humble king, the apparent fulfillment of a prophecy made centuries before by an otherwise obscure prophet named Zechariah, is the long-expected Messiah, the anointed one of God, who comes to bring about God’s will for the Jewish people. He will correct all that is wrong in their lives and restore their nation to the magnificence it had known in the time of David, a king even then slipping into legendary significance.

The crying aloud is taken up by the people who line the road, curious about the procession, about the one seated on the donkey, the one who seems to be the object of their acclaim. Is Jesus so famous that the onlookers know who He is, what His presence might mean? Do they recognize Him or are they simply caught up in the excitement of the moment? They put coats and garments and branches

on the road to cover the dust raised by the procession, an ancient and time-honored tradition of greeting.

How confusing, how unsettling for Jesus' Disciples, the ones who have followed Him down other dusty roads and witnessed inexplicable healings and even the raising of the dead. They have heard His sermons, His prayers, and seen vast crowds fed and swayed by His presence.

But they have also seen the gathering anger and hatred caused by those words and actions, the anger and hatred of Pharisees and Sadducees and Scribes and Priests of the Temple in Jerusalem, all those whose lives might be radically changed by such a man as Jesus. They had heard Him predict His own death. The Disciples have pleaded with Jesus not to go to Jerusalem, not to put His life, and perhaps theirs, into the hands of those who would seek to silence them.

On this day there is no silence. There is chanting and singing as the procession, led by His Disciples, as they descend from the Mount of Olives toward the gates of the city, the chanting and singing of men who have received new courage, new faith, new strength by the resolve of their leader and friend. It is a time to rejoice!

How strange that it took the Episcopal Church so many years to grasp the joy of this morning's Palm Liturgy. Those of us who grew up with the 1928 Book of Common Prayer, and all those before it, will remember that there was no such service. Rather, there was a service of "Holy Communion" as in other Sundays. There was an Epistle from Philippians but no Old Testament lesson - that lesson is a gift from the 1979 Prayer Book. The Gospel was Matthew, beginning abruptly with the Chief Priests taking Jesus to Pilate and ending with the Centurion's saying "Truly, this man was the Son of God." Essentially, the length of the Gospel reading was in expectation that the congregation would not take part in what we of the 1979 book know to be "Holy Week."

Personally, and I imagine I speak for many Priests and Deacons, the Palm Liturgy brings Lent to a close and is essential to the beginning of Holy Week. To really understand the gathering darkness of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday we need to feel the excited expectations that swept Jesus' Disciples and the others

who followed Him into Jerusalem; the descent from the heights, both literal and figurative, is made so much more clear to us as the week unfolds.

I have often seen the faces of that first Palm Sunday in the faces of the congregation hearing the lessons and prayers and receiving palms to carry in their own procession. I have delighted in being last in a long procession.

I have even delighted in reaching the church door and coming into a church with filled pews and usually finding myself singing a totally wrong verse of “All Glory, Laud and Honor.”

In His Holy Name.