

Palm Sunday (March 16, 2008) Text: Matthew 21:1-11; Philippians 2:5-11
“Humble . . . Like Jesus?”

Every Palm Sunday every Christian faces a dilemma. We can't decide whether we are supposed be festive on this day, or pensive. Do we join the pilgrims outside of Jerusalem, and wave our palm branches to celebrate the Kingship of Jesus? Or do we join the small band of disciples peering in at the cross of Golgotha, and weep for the tremendous cruelty done to our King? The answer, of course, is: *“Do both!”*

This may seem like something of a coward's way out (or at least the option of one who cannot decide), but it really reflects the truth that Palm Sunday is a day of both extremes. Clearly we are to voice our praise to the One ***“who comes in the name of the Lord,”*** as did the crowd who cut down branches of palm and threw their coats on the ground. But just as clearly we see ahead the Good Friday that comes every year, and it saddens our hearts and souls as deeply as anything can. It may be helpful for this task for us to keep in mind what we learn of and from our Lord this day. Matthew quotes the prophet Zechariah when he writes: ***“Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”***

“. . . your king is coming to you, humble . . .” Humble. Zechariah had also used a couple of other adjectives: ***“triumphant and victorious”*** (which is yet another reminder of our quandary — it's like we have looked at the last chapter of the murder mystery . . . we know the outcome . . .); but let us focus on this word “humble”

The Hebrew form comes from a word that means *“to be bowed down; afflicted.”* It describes a soldier who has suffered defeat at the hands of his enemies, or a slave whose master is nothing but oppressive, or any number of people in this world who have been served up to the forces of greed, power, prejudice, and hatred. Zechariah announces that Israel's true King, Messiah, would come as one like that, but who is also ***“triumphant and victorious”***

Israel had, from its return from Exile on, chosen to focus on those two words as the source of their hope . . . they firmly believed Messiah would be completely “triumphant and victorious;” but they had forgotten that Messiah was also to be humble. “Beat down and afflicted” certainly are words that apply to the Jesus we encounter in the Passion narrative. The irony of Palm Sunday is that it was that very affliction that is the deepest cause for our celebration.

The crowd of pilgrims who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem with shouts of “Hosanna” and branches of palm were celebrating the wrong thing. They were celebrating their longing that this Jesus would be the “triumphant and victorious” Messiah they had heard Zechariah promise. But the real celebration is that Jesus came to be “humble” — “beaten down and afflicted”

We do not celebrate with sadistic pleasure over the suffering and death of a fellow human-being; but we do rejoice that the Messiah who showed up on the road to Jerusalem did not come to embrace pomp and ceremony, accolades and praises. He came to die. St. John and St. Paul go to great lengths to help to see that death as the glory of the Christ.

Historically, we have talked of his Incarnation, Passion and Death as His State of Humiliation. But listen to St. Paul: “. . . *though he was in the form of God, [He] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself [there’s that word again] and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*”

No mention of the resurrection or ascension in this context — only humiliation, and death. Does this mean that Paul was rejecting the resurrection? No way! It does mean that Paul understood that the cross

was where the work got done.

Jesus Himself affirms this: “. . . *just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*” (John 3) “*When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that . . . I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me.*” (John 8) “. . . *when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.*” (John 12). In each case here, “*lifted up*” refers to His crucifixion.

Isaiah adds to this mix the prophetic message: “. . . *I did not turn backward. I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.*” The paradox of the Gospel is that Christ’s Humiliation is His glory — and the means by which we gain life.

So when we speak of Jesus as humble, we are not merely making a statement that He was a self-effacing kind of person. Jesus was not an “Aw, shucks” kind of guy. Proof? Look at the Processional Gospel for this day. Jesus not only accepts the ride into Jerusalem, He initiates it. He is the one who tells the disciples to go get the donkey and foal. When the crowd start to gather and rip off branches and strip off their coats, Jesus makes no move to dissuade them from this.

There is absolutely nothing of the kind of behaviors we have come to associate with “meekness” that we see in the Jesus of Palm Sunday — nor the Jesus of Good Friday, for that matter. No Casper Milquetoast could have ever endured the trial, beatings, and cross as did Christ.

So “humble” does not mean “without resource,” or “weak,” or “passive, or “ineffectual.” When we say that Jesus is humble, we are not claiming that He was . . . well here are the synonyms for “humble” in the Oxford American Thesaurus: “*modest, unassuming, self-effacing, unassertive, unpretentious, unostentatious, meek, plain, common, ordinary, simple, poor, of low birth, low-born, of low rank, low-ranking, low, lowly, inferior, plebeian, proletarian, base, mean, unrefined, vulgar,*

unimportant, insignificant, inconsequential, undistinguished, ignoble, servile, submissive, obsequious, subservient, deferential, slavish, sycophantic.”

If you want, I could spend the next forty to eighty minutes making the case that Jesus, with the possible exception of “submissive,” was none of those. No, we are not claiming that Jesus was anything like a servile, undistinguished, inferior person when we call Him “humble.” We are staking a claim — on life — life now and life in eternity — on the reality that Jesus’ humility consisted in being “bowed down, afflicted.”

And we must hasten to add: *“for our sakes.”* This affliction, because it was done for us, is the very reason we exalt and glorify Him — today and always. It is why we come to this week and have asked God to *“assist us, . . . that we may enter with joy upon the contemplation of those mighty acts whereby You have given us life everlasting . . .”* Our truest joy is to be found not only before an empty tomb, but before the cross on which was hung the Messiah who is humble.

So today, with great joy, we wave palm branches and shout “Hosanna!” We listen to the message of His Passion and Death. We watch with patience throughout this week as we walk with Him from Upper Room, to Gethsemane’s garden, to the courts of Caiaphas and Pilate, and finally to Golgotha’s hill. We watch Him lifted up, and we know that, in His humiliation is not only His glory — but our salvation.

Amen.