

April 2, 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As we prepare to journey through Holy Week I offer these thoughts hoping they will inspire prayer and reflection. Please feel free to forward them to anyone who might find them meaningful.

Palm Sunday Parallels: Then, Now, and Always

Palm Sunday is upon us, and we begin Holy Week with the commemoration of Jesus' celebratory entry into Jerusalem, greeted with a jubilant crowd waving palm branches amid shouts of "Hosanna! 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!' The King of Israel!" (Jn. 12:13 NKJV) Hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel (Luke 24:21), and being soon after His miraculous raising of Lazarus (John 11: 43), Jesus was greeted with wild enthusiasm as He rode on a young donkey, a sign of His Messianic Kingship that was only later understood by His followers (Zech. 9:9, Jn. 12: 16).

The very **first** time Jesus entered Jerusalem, when He was but a baby in Mary's arms, coming to be presented in the Temple in obedience to Jewish law (Luke 2: 22-40), was a very different occasion, and in his poem commemorating Jesus' Presentation in the Temple, John Ellerton cleverly contrasts Jesus' majestic, triumphal entry into the city, with His first, much more humble one.

Hail to the Lord who comes,
Comes to his Temple gate!
Not with his angel host,
Not in his kingly state:
No shouts proclaim him nigh,
No crowds his coming wait. (John Ellerton, 1826-1893)

"No shouts proclaim him nigh, No crowds his coming wait," seem lines that will be eerily appropriate for our churches, come this Palm Sunday.

Even in the best of times, Holy Week is a roller coaster of an emotional ride, from the giddy high of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem through the nadir of His arrest and crucifixion to the breathtaking news of His Resurrection. This year, we prepare for a ride-within-a-ride, as our own, pandemic roller coaster gathers speed on its downward slope to an unknown depth; a depth we have never experienced, and have difficulty imagining. We know the *normal* rhythm of Holy Week: it lasts eight days, and, even as we live through the services commemorating the Last Supper and Jesus' death and resurrection, we know when things will happen, how long it will take, and what the ending will be, and that when it's over, there will be chocolate. We know the *general* end of our story too: we know there is distant light at the end of our "corona-tunnel"—but we don't know how long or arduous our journey will be; only that it will be scary, and unpleasant.

John Ellerton uses our knowledge of the end of Jesus' life to emphasize the humble character of the beginning of His life. A consistent device of the writers of the Gospels and Epistles is to show that Jesus is the Christ by emphasizing or referring to specific instances in which He fulfills the Messianic requirements of the Law and the Prophets of the Old Testament; they use common knowledge of past Old Testament events and imagery to inform readers about events in Jesus's life, and to show His significance for our salvation: Jesus, the Paschal Lamb, is the Passover Lamb of God, taking away the sins of the world (Jn 1: 29, 1 Cor. 5:7); Jesus' self-sacrifice for our redemption takes the place of the animal sacrifices of the Temple (Heb. 7: 27); the saving waters of Baptism are contrasted to the killing waters of the Flood (1 Pet. 3: 20-21); the Living Bread of the Eucharist is the new type of the manna from heaven (Jn 6: 31 ff); and Jesus, the means of our salvation, is contrasted with Adam, the cause of its necessity (1 Cor. 15:22).

Old Testament events help us understand current spiritual realities; is it possible, therefore, that our current, pandemic situation might help us understand future spiritual realities? We perceive God's majesty and power through

the beauty of His creation; Jesus castigated the Israelites for perceiving temporal signs, but not spiritual ones (Matt. 16:3): can our observations of the physical world help us understand the spiritual? Can the Temporal help us understand the Eternal? Can our current physical separation from our family, friends, and Church services help us understand mankind's separation from God's Kingdom? Can our need to be physically saved in this frightening time help us understand our need for the salvation Jesus achieved for us on the cross? Can our yearning to be physically together again in church help us understand our yearning to enter into the Presence of God? Will the joy we feel when we are together again point us to the far greater joy we will feel when we are in the Heavenly Jerusalem? After forty years in the desert the Israelites crossed into the Promised Land; we know that at the end of Holy Week there will be Easter; we know there is light at the end of our "corona-tunnel"; can this knowledge help us contemplate the light at the end of our "life-tunnel?"

"Like as the hart desireth the water-brooks, so longeth my soul after thee, O God. My soul is athirst for God, yea, even for the living God: when shall I come to appear before the presence of God?" (Ps. 42: 1-2, Coverdale)

"I was glad when they said to me,
"Let us go into the house of the Lord." (Ps. 122: 1)

We most certainly will be glad to go to church again, and we know we'll be glad one day when we get to heaven, the light at the end of our "life-tunnel." We are assured, and we know, that it is a real and wonderful place, and that God loves us, and wants us to be with Him there forever. As He entered Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday, Jesus knew where He was ultimately going (Jn. 12:27); we think we know where we are going when this pandemic is over; but praise God, we **know** where we are going when our earthly journey is over!

"I go to prepare a place for you." (John 14: 2b)

"...today you will be with me in paradise." (Luke 23: 43)

"And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away" (Rev. 21: 4).

"Do you spend time quietly about the affairs of eternity? Do you have seasons allotted for prayer, meditation, and reading in secret?" (Isaac Watts, 1674-1748)

Most Merciful, Heavenly Father, Blessed are You, and Blessed be Your Holy Name! You have created all things according to Your will, and You hold the world in the palm of Your hand; we praise You for revealing Yourself to us in Your creation, Your word, and Your Son; we bless You for giving us wisdom enough to discern Your loving presence; and we thank You for allowing us to approach Your throne of grace now in prayer, as we hope to one day, in heaven. Send Your Holy Spirit upon us this week, we pray, Lord, to help us find new depths of meaning in this Holy Week, new sources of inspiration in Your holy Word, new sources of comfort in our sorrow, new sources of hope in Your Son's loving sacrifice for us, and new sources of joy in His glorious Resurrection; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Tom Stockton