

Impressions on a Palm Sunday

Luke 19:28-44

It is Palm Sunday. We are confronted with a processional that is rich in imagery and symbolism. Palm branches being waved; cloaks being thrown on the roadway; Jesus is riding into a chorus of shouts: “***Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!***”

We’ve heard it all before, so many times in fact, that I fear there is a danger of it becoming rather tedious for those lacking in imagination. After all, how many times do we need the preacher to remind us of the symbolism of the donkey, or the meaning of the palm branches? I suspect we’ve all heard this a thousand times before. So, this morning I will do neither. Instead, I want to share some of my lingering impressions, not only of the triumphal entry itself, but also of the immediate context in which it took place.

A clue to the importance of the context is in verse 37: “... ***the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen.***” What miracles had they seen? Think about what our Lord had done in the days leading up to Palm Sunday. He had been to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. There the Master had raised Lazarus from the dead, showing himself to be “the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25). Surely, this powerful miracle would have profound implications for our Lord’s own time in the tomb. Would the tomb be able to hold this Mighty One who had been able to wrench Lazarus from its iron grip?

Then there had been our Lord’s final walk to Jerusalem for the Passover – the Passover at which he would be the Lamb! The last major stop on his journey to Jerusalem was in Jericho. As he approached Jericho, Jesus had healed a blind man named Bartimaeus. At the command of the Master, Bartimaeus’ shroud of darkness had been lifted so that he could see.

While passing through Jericho, there is the episode with a tax collector, Zacchaeus. This man is hated by the crowd, but his soul is precious to the Lord. By the time Jesus is done with Zacchaeus we hear this crooked tax collector saying, “***Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount***” (Lu. 19:8). Jesus replies, “***Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost***” (vs. 9-10).

Lazarus has been raised from the dead. Bartimaeus has been given his sight. Zacchaeus has found salvation. Jesus has brought life, light, and salvation – all the things he came to do! It has all happened in the shadow of the cross, on our Lord’s final journey to Jerusalem. This is the context, the backdrop to the Triumphal Entry.

My first impression, then, is this: What a glorious, selfless Savior we have! We might have expected him to be somewhat self-absorbed at this time. But no! He was still thinking of others! We live in a world desperately searching for heroes, people we can idolize. When we are not watching American Idol, we are flocking to the theatres to see Superman, Batman, and Spiderman. We exalt athletes and movie stars, placing them on pedestals from which they can only fall. Why do we commit this insanity when we already have the greatest hero, the best friend, the most admirable person imaginable in Jesus Christ? Has anyone ever done more than Jesus has done? Who has ever performed such mighty works? The Master’s works were not only miraculous, they were prolific.

John remarked that Jesus did so many things that if every one of them were to be written down, even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written (John 21:25). Has anyone even come close to the Master's wisdom, his moral purity and excellence, and his stunning radiance? Compared to our Jesus, Superman, Batman, and Spiderman are the three stooges! If we truly want a super-hero, let us stop reading comic books and start reading the Gospel.

My second impression of this whole scene is of the tragedy of Jerusalem. As Jesus made his descent from the Mount of Olives towards the city, he wept. He foresaw what would befall the city. He knew that the religious leaders were too busy plotting their own intrigues against Rome, too busy with their own designs of how they would re-establish their national supremacy. He knew that their political maneuvering against Rome would bring their own destruction. Sure enough, in 70 A.D., Rome descended on Jerusalem with such devastating power that the city was flattened. History records that it was so devastated that a plough was drawn across the midst of it, completely fulfilling our Lord's prophecy in verse 44, that not one stone would be left on another. Their hearts were so hardened, and they were so preoccupied with their own ambitions and interests that the coming of their long-awaited Messiah was hidden from their eyes. Bartimaeus had received his sight, but the religious establishment had not!

Sadly, Jerusalem is symbolic of all our hometowns and cities. It could just as well be Victoria. Just as our Lord wept for Jerusalem, if we truly had his heart, we would weep for our city. We would weep for our neighbors who do not know the things that make for true peace. We would weep over the unabating loneliness and alienation that results in destructive behavior patterns right here in our city. Oh yes, if we were more like Jesus, we would weep more than we do.

The people of Victoria are much like those of Jerusalem. They are so self-absorbed and preoccupied with their own interests and ambitions that they do not recognize the time of God's coming to them, and they are rejecting the opportunities that God is offering to them. We must weep for them; we must pray for them; we must pray that it will not be too late for them to find the way of peace – too late as it was for Jerusalem!

My third impression of the Triumphal Entry – and the days leading up to it – is that of an uphill battle. Some of us may be thinking, "If only you understood how much of an uphill battle life is for me."

Do you remember my remark that Jericho was the last major stop for Jesus on the way to Jerusalem? The road from Jericho to Jerusalem was about 15 miles, ascending three thousand feet through dry desert. It took some 6-8 hours of uphill walking on a road that was infamous for highway robbers. It was a weary, ascending road with a cross waiting at the top for our Lord!

The great ways of life are always ascending ways. Duty is an ascent from aimless irresponsibility; goodness is an ascent from evil deeds and imaginations; love is an ascent from selfishness; faith is an ascent from the seen to the unseen, and from the visible to the invisible. The way of the Lord is always on the higher-up side of life, always on the Highway of Holiness!

That is what Jesus still offers today, the upside of life. He is a unique conqueror, giving his followers victory over the downside of life. Even now the Master says to us:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:28-30).

This leads me right into my final impression. I have this impression that the Triumphal Entry is as much for you and me as it was for the people in Jerusalem. Jesus did not merely desire to enter their city, he longed to enter their hearts. Today the Master desires to ride into your heart and mine with fresh power for real living. He is giving us yet another chance to say, “Yes Lord, I want you, not only as my Savior, but as my Lord!”

In that original crowd was Bartimaeus, who was once blind but now could see. There was Lazarus, once dead but now very much alive! Zacchaeus was there, once lost but now found! Nicodemus was in the crowd, a secret disciple who ultimately stood up to be counted. We are all those people and many more! What will we say as Jesus passes by? What will we say?

We are living in a season of grace. Today is the day of salvation, for none of us is promised tomorrow. I will never forget listening to that great man of God and fiery preacher, Oswald J. Smith, founder of People’s Church in Toronto. When he was in his nineties, he preached what was possibly his last sermon, certainly the last one I heard him preach. In it he told the story of a beautiful young woman, about eighteen, who had never accepted Christ as Lord and Savior, despite attending People’s Church for a number of years.

One Sunday morning, as the people were filing out of the church, Smith took this young lady aside. He felt a strange sense of urgency that he could not explain. “My dear,” he said, “When are you going to put your faith in Christ?” She replied, “Don’t worry, Dr. Smith. Some day I will. I’m still young and I’m just not ready. There are things I want to do first.”

Not many minutes later, after locking the front door to the church, Dr. Smith walked down the street for two or three blocks, where he saw a crowd gathered around a streetcar. As he drew near he saw the lifeless body of the same young woman on the tracks under the wheels of the streetcar. Dr. Smith said, “I wept as I realized that, for this beautiful young woman, some day would never come. She had passed into a Christless eternity and her destiny was sealed.”

Dr. Smith wept for a young woman; Jesus wept for a city! Today the Master weeps for our city; for whom do we weep? We must weep, but not merely for ourselves. Let there be tears of repentance. Then we must go out to the lost, lest they miss the coming of the King! He would make his Triumphal Entry into their hearts!