

John 12:12-19; Luke 23:39-43

Judging by our Scripture reading in St. John 12, today is either Palm Sunday or the First Sunday in Advent because it can be read as the Holy Gospel for both. Either we're about to enter Holy Week, or it's time to begin our Christmas shopping and decorating. The triumphal entry text, when we hear it in church, may cause us to wonder if winter is coming or going, but one thing is clear--whichever day of the Church Year it is, Jesus is coming, although the focus of His coming may differ. In Advent we look at how He comes to us through the Virgin Mary. On Palm Sunday we see how He comes riding on a donkey to die. But whichever way we look at it, through the eyes of Advent or Holy Week, there are certain similarities which are too obvious to avoid.

Just before Christmas Mary, presumably on a donkey, rode into town with Jesus in her womb amidst throngs of people. They had come to register for the census. On Palm Sunday Jesus rode into the city and throngs of people gathered for the occasion. At Christmas Jesus was placed into the wood of a manger. In Holy Week He was placed onto the wood of a rugged cross. At Christmas King Herod sought to kill Jesus. In Holy Week King Caesar, through Pontius Pilate, carries out His death by crucifixion.

Today the crowds are thinner than before. It's the year of the census, but we do not travel to the place of our ancestral birth to register. It comes by mail. And it's Palm Sunday. Jesus is riding to us upon the forms of the Word, bread and wine. But now-a-days people don't care about that too much. They wait for Easter to come before they gather. That's just the opposite of how it was years ago. Less than a dozen disciples assembled together on Easter, but throngs gathered on Palm Sunday. Now, unless there is a confirmation on Palm Sunday, most people wait for Easter before dressing for church.

But you are here, and allow me to ask, "Why?" But hold your answer until we ask the same question of those who gathered on that first Palm Sunday. We may have been led to believe that the crowds gathered because they loved Jesus; that they were celebrating with joy His coming into their city. But St. John tells us the true reason. "It was," he says, "That they heard He had done this sign." What sign? The raising of Lazarus from the dead. And so can we not safely say that the crowds gathered with their palm branches, with their cries of "Hosanna!" not because of who Jesus was, but because of what He did?

Why are you here? It might be embarrassing for many to answer that question honestly next Sunday. And so I ask it today of you the crowd, although much thinner, which still gathers on Palm Sunday. But unlike that crowd at Jerusalem, you gather do you not, because of who Jesus is? You are not here because of what your eyes have seen, but because of what your heart believes. The people then saw Jesus raise a dead man from the grave. "Lazarus, come out!" He called, and the dead man came to life. No wonder the street into Jerusalem was packed with people a few days later on Palm Sunday.

If Jesus raised to life a man out of our cemetery and it happened last week in front of many witnesses, today in here would be standing room only. Thousands of voices would be crying, "Hosanna!" (Save us, we pray.) Palm branches would be everywhere. But they would assemble because of what they saw, because of what Jesus did, not because of who He is. You are here not just because of what Jesus did. You are not here because He was born of the Virgin Mary, because He suffered under Pontius Pilate, because He was crucified, died and was buried, because He rose again on the third day--even though He did these things.

What happened to that Palm Sunday crowd in Jerusalem? What Jesus did in raising Lazarus did not make them His disciples, did not give them love in their hearts for Him, did not give them faith. By Good Friday they were gone, back to their shops, and their fields, and their kitchens. The Pharisees saw what Jesus did and it made them angry. The Chief Priests saw what Jesus did and they put Him to death. But your eyes have not seen. You did not see Lazarus come out of his tomb. You did not see all the miracles Jesus performed. And yet you gather with your palms and your "Hosannas!" and you come back to gather for Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday, and Easter Sunday, and each week after that. And it's because of who Jesus is to you. He is not just the King, He is your King. He is not just the Lord, He is your Lord. He is not just the Savior, He is your Savior. He is not just one who was born, suffered, died, was buried and rose again--He is the one who did these things for you.

There was a thief who may, or may not, have been at that Palm Sunday processional. He was probably breaking into homes while the people were out cutting palm branches. He did not see what Jesus did. He did not care about Lazarus. He waved no palm. He cried no "Hosanna!" until he was hanging from a cross. Then he turned to Jesus in repentance and said, "Hosanna, Lord." (Save me, I pray.) What mattered to him as he was about to die is not that Jesus had healed lepers and raised the dead; what mattered is who Jesus was. The sign above His head said, "King of the Jews," but that thief saw Him as his King who was dying for His subjects. Jesus' face was covered in blood, but that thief saw a face and eyes full of love for him. That thief did not see Jesus do any miracles. It didn't matter. All he wanted from Jesus was the word of pardon. He knew Jesus was his God whom he had offended by his life of sin. But his God was also his Savior. "Lord, remember me," he prayed..."Hosanna, Lord save me."

In a very real sense you are more like that thief than the Palm Sunday crowd. For one thing your sins have placed you next to Jesus. The Palm Sunday crowd did not stay with Jesus. They saw, they came, they left. But you are like the thief. He could not leave. The nails made sure of that. When you, dear sinner, hear God's Law which condemns you for your sins; which says of a truth, "The soul that sins shall die," and you know this means you; that you are guilty before God--then God's accusing Law has nailed you next to Jesus. But if you're going to be nailed to a cross, the place next to Jesus is the place to be nailed. Many sinners are nailed by God's accusing Law far away from Jesus, because in confessing their sins they are not given forgiveness in Christ. Their minister tells them they must do some work of penance to gain God's favor. But when your sins have you nailed down, there is nothing you can do. That thief understood this. "Hosanna, Lord!" he prayed, "Please save me."

You are like that thief more than the Palm Sunday crowd because you are not here to celebrate Jesus, you are here because you love Him. Jesus forgave that thief. He gave heaven to him, and that thief never loved anyone more than he loved Jesus. After that, it wasn't the nails that held that thief in place--it was his love for Jesus that kept him next to Christ. Isn't that why you are here? Because Jesus is here and He is everything to you. You love Him. You want to be with Him. You want to hear His words just like the thief did. And His words to you are exactly the same: "Dear sinner, you are forgiven. You will be in Paradise with Me."

You're not here to see mighty works. You're here for Jesus' words because, like that thief, you know that Jesus' words give life. And so you, friend, are like Lazarus. Jesus calls you forth out of the grave of your sins. He puts His life within you. He does this by forgiving you. That Palm Sunday crowd was amazed because Jesus pulled Lazarus out of the grave. But a few days later on a lonely hill, Jesus pulled a thief out of hell, and yet no one cared except the thief.

But that's how it all began at Christmas. He was placed into the wood of a manger, and only a few shepherds cared. And as He was dying on the wood of a cross, only a few people cared...His mother, a few disciples, a thief who would soon be in heaven. And you care. That's why you are here. So when your Savior is placed upon the wood of the altar, you come up like that repentant thief, to be with your Savior and receive Paradise from Him. So when your Savior speaks His words to you here you, like the thief, hang upon each and every word of comfort--because, like him, your cry, your prayer is always, "Hosanna! Lord, my Lord, save me!" And He has. Amen.