

Palmarum, the Sixth Sunday in Lent
March 16, 2008

Rev. David A. Kind
University Lutheran Chapel
Minneapolis, Minnesota

✧ Jesu juva ✧

ONLY THROUGH THE CROSS

Zechariah 9:9-10; Philippians 2:5-11; John 12:12-19, Matthew 26:1-27:66

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Every person has thoughts about God, at least contemplates His existence, and usually His ways as well. And so every person is in a certain sense a theologian, one who studies God. God's way of doing things is not usually the way people expect. In fact, the Lord's way of doing things often seems ridiculous to human reason. Luther argues in his Heidelberg Disputation of 1521, "That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened [Rom. 1:20]. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross" (Luther's Works, Volume 31, p.40). In other words, what you can see and figure out about God, cannot be apprehended or understood rightly unless these things are seen through the Christ's suffering and cross.

While people may opine about how God must be, and spend all sorts of mental energy on discussing His glorious attributes (and there is no doubt that God is glorious), you really cannot know God unless you know Him through the cross and crucifixion of Jesus. You simply cannot get at God's glory in any other way. Hence Luther argues in His proof for the thesis I quoted a few moments ago: "visible things of God are placed in opposition to the invisible, namely, his human nature, weakness, foolishness. The Apostle in I Cor. 1[:25] calls them the weakness and folly of God. Because men misused the knowledge of God through works, God wished again to be recognized in suffering, and to condemn wisdom concerning invisible things by means of wisdom concerning visible things, so that those who did not honor God as manifested in his works should honor him as he is hidden in his suffering" (Luther, page 52).

But this is not the way we naturally think about God. At heart we are naturally what Luther calls "theologians of glory". We expect to see God's glory in action. We expect Him to at once to come down and rescue us from all suffering, put down our enemies, ride through our streets in victorious vengeance over every manner of evil. And not only do we think it below God to have suffered, we think that because we believe on Him we should be victorious over suffering too even in this life; that God should make us healthy and successful and wealthy too. And when this doesn't happen we call it evil. We see every form of suffering or want as being evil. And we fail to see God at work, or perhaps even being there at all. Luther again argued: "A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is" (Luther, page 40).

And so it was the theologians of glory in Jesus' own day too. They were delighted to see Jesus coming at last to take possession, they supposed, of the royal city of Jerusalem. When they heard that He was coming, St. John tells us, they cut palm branches and "went out to meet Him, and cried out: 'Hosanna! "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!" The King of Israel!" And why

were they so excited? Why did they rush out to meet Him? John tells us that it was because of the raising of Lazarus from the dead. People had heard that Jesus had done this great sign, and were eager to see the glory of God, the glory of Messiah, as He came to claim His throne. Indeed it seemed that the Pharisees' disappointed words were right. The whole world had gone after Him.

But look at what Jesus does. It is not at all what the crowd must have expected. In fact, He turns their expectation on its head, if you think about it. The glorious King enters the royal and holy city in complete humility and meekness. He does not turn away the crowds, for their words and actions are proper ones. But what He does they must have considered ridiculous had they time to stop and think about it. The great King that they were proclaiming and celebrating was riding in sitting on a donkey's foal. Where is the glory and pride in that!?! Where is the display of power and might? This is just not the way Kings travel. They might be carried by others in a litter. They might ride in on a powerful stallion. They might even come on a camel, all decked out with finery. But on a donkey's foal? And yet this is what Jesus does. Even His disciples don't quite get it at first.

But while Jesus was disappointing the expectation of His followers, He was fulfilling the expectation of the prophets; for Zechariah, whose words you heard read today, said: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you; he is just and having salvation, Lowly and riding on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey." Moreover, Zechariah speaks about the glorious salvation that the Messiah King would accomplish, about how He would establish a powerful rule to end all warfare against God's holy people, Israel, about how His dominion would extend over all the world, and about how He would win God's favor that those imprisoned by their sins might be returned to God through the fulfillment of the Covenant.

But once again what Jesus actually does to accomplish all of that is completely the opposite of what His followers expected Him to do. You heard it all from St. Matthew today. He enters the city to take His throne, it is true. But the throne is not in the city, but outside of it on a hill called the Place of the Skull. And He gets there without pomp or ceremony. He is instead betrayed in the Garden by one of His own men. He is arrested, paraded from ruler to ruler for trial, abandoned or denied by His closest friends, ridiculed by the people He would rule. And their cries of "Hosanna" change into cries of "Let Him be crucified!" He is beaten, scourged, forced to carry His own cross, stripped of all clothing, and at last is nailed up to die on the cross.

And we would call all of this evil (and no doubt there was evil involved on the part of the Jews and the Romans), but God calls this crucifixion good. Once again Jesus has done what seems completely wrong to us. But by doing this, He fulfills the words of the prophet, the will of His Father, the salvation of mankind. What appears so evil is actually the greatest good that this world has ever or will ever know. And this is where we come to see the real glory of God.

St. Paul explains: "[Christ Jesus] made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross." And what was the result? "Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." To the glory of the Father! Here is the glory of God, glory realized only through sacrifice and suffering, glory realized only through the shedding of the blood of the covenant, and the death of the King.

And yet this humility, this suffering, this sacrifice, all answer the cries of the Palm Sunday crowd, though they did not realize it at the time. "Hosanna!" they cried, which means "save now!" And that is exactly what Christ did. He humbled Himself in order to save us. And here we see the proof of the invisible things of God, His love, His mercy, His greatness, His glory. We see them, as Luther rightly said, through suffering and cross.

St. Paul says to you today: "Let this same mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus..." One could write entire books unpacking that sentence. Suffice it to say that it has to do with humility, with suffering, with crosses, and above all with love and faithfulness. In the sentences just before this reading, Paul writes: "Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others." Be humble. Be faithful. Put others first. Be willing to suffer, perhaps even to suffer for the sake of your neighbor. Do not think that in such things God has abandoned you, or that such things are necessarily evil or some sort of wrath against against you.

The theologian of glory will have none of this. Such a person wants it all fulfilled right now without a cross and without suffering. But that is not the way God works. God works through crosses. For by the cross you were saved. And bearing your crosses, you both follow Christ, and are conformed to Him. And the Lord who loves you, will by His grace, keep you in the midst of these crosses. When you humble yourself to confess your sins and doubts and heartache, He will raise you up with forgiveness and strength through His Word of absolution and Gospel. He will feed you with His own life-giving food at His festal table even as you suffer and struggle. And He will be attentive to your prayers. He will, as the Psalmist says (73:23-24), hold you by your right hand, guide you with His counsel, and afterward receive you to glory.

For just as Christ who humbled Himself was raised up in glory, and ascended to the most glorious throne of God in heaven, so also we will, having bourn our crosses in this world, at the last be received by Him into that glory, where He lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, for ever and ever. Amen.

✧ Soli Deo gloria ✧