

Palm Sunday
April 17, 2011

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Minneapolis, Minnesota

+ Jesu juva +

THE OLD AND NEW FEAST

Psalm 118; John 12:12-19

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

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.” This day we celebrate the fulfillment of this prophecy from Zechariah as Christ entered into Jerusalem as her king to the shouts of His people. There He was not on a great warhorse, but on the foal of a borrowed donkey, while the people who went with Him shouted out the familiar words of the 118th Psalm: “Hosanna! ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!’”

These words they shouted are key to understanding just what Jesus was doing that day. They are prayer, they are acclamation, they are the fulfillment of prophecy, and they are the signal that something new was taking place in Jerusalem. To see these things, we must take a closer look at the words themselves, at the Psalm from which they are taken, and at the way the Jews used this Psalm in their worship.

First, the words themselves: The Word Hosanna is more than just a shout of joy. It is actually a prayer. It literally means “Save now” and is taken from Psalm 118:25 “Save now, I pray, O Lord; O Lord, I pray, send prosperity.” According to Psalm 118 it is the Lord Himself who comes down to save in answer to this prayer. And hence the people shout out the next verse of the Psalm: “Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord!” To come in the Name of the Lord, could mean to come as God’s messenger, one bearing His Word; and certainly Jesus is that. For He, more than any prophet before Him, was the bringer of the Word of God, being Himself the very Word of God incarnate, the Divine Speaker and Giver of all Scripture and prophecy. And so in the Psalm, the one who comes in the Name of the Lord is acknowledged to be God Himself: “You are my God, and I will praise You; You are my God, I will exalt You.”

And so whether they fully understood what they were saying or not, the people that day were acclaiming Jesus as the Son of God who was coming into Jerusalem to bring them salvation. And that is, of course, exactly what Jesus was doing. He was riding into Jerusalem that day to begin a series of events that would by the end of the week result in His being captured, tried, tortured, and executed to win salvation for the people of God. As St. Paul tells us this morn-

ing: "Christ Jesus... being in the form of God... 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 by this humble obedience to God the Father, a humility shown not only in His mode of entrance to the city, but most especially and deeply in the humiliation of the crucifixion, Jesus by dying in our place, pays the price for all of our sins, gaining for us, not only forgiveness of those sins, but also new life and heavenly glory in Him.

And so the people that day walked in procession with Jesus shouting the words of this Psalm and carrying in their hands palm branches as a sort of victory procession. But there is more going on here than just that. Have you never thought it odd that they cut down branches from the trees to greet Jesus. I mean, what a strange thing to do! And yet they did this for a very good and profound reason. You see, the cutting of the branches was not just a sign of victory, but was also one of the ceremonial actions of one of the great Jewish feasts, the Feast of Tabernacles.

Now you may be wondering just what the Feast of Tabernacles has to do with Palm Sunday. Well, this Psalm they were using to acclaim Jesus as the Divine Messiah is the same Psalm that was prayed every day of the week long Feast of Tabernacles, especially the 25th verse, the Hosanna verse the people shouted as Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. And each day as they said the words of the Psalm, they would walk in procession around the Temple, carrying with them Palm branches and other tree branches, which they would then lay against and around the altar. Hence the Psalm reads a few verses later: "God is the Lord, and He has given us light. In festal procession bind the branches to the horns of the altar."

So what does this have to do with Jesus? Everything! Originally the Feast of Tabernacles was intended by God to commemorate the fact that the people had lived in tents for forty years following the Exodus from Egypt. But God had brought them at last in safety into their own land. And hence they were to commemorate this every year by setting up booths and living in them during the feast. And so we read in Leviticus 23: "All who are native Israelites shall dwell in booths, that your generations may know that I made the children of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." And what was Jesus now come to do? But to rescue the people from the Egypt of sin and death? He was enacting a greater exodus, and so even though the Feast of Tabernacles was not until harvest time, the people enact it ritually when Jesus enters into Jerusalem, for He was coming to fulfill everything that feast was about. He was coming to be bound Himself to the altar of the cross for us.

But there is more. You see it was also at the Feast of Tabernacles that Solomon dedicated the First Temple, at which time the Presence of Lord, the Glory

Cloud of God, entered the temple and filled it, so that the priests could not even continue with their liturgy. And what was happening on Palm Sunday? God was again coming into the holy city of Jerusalem. And upon arriving, the first thing He does is go to the Temple (where He then cleanses it of the money changers, and teaches the people). Once again God had come to dwell with His people, but He would not remain in a temple made with hands, but raised up an everlasting temple in His own flesh which after the crucifixion, was raised to life again the third day.

Yes, the people were saying a lot more than a simple words of praise when they cried their hosannas that day. They were signaling, perhaps even unwittingly, that Jesus had come to fulfill everything that their faith and worship of God had been about. He was the Messiah who was coming to bring to completion the promises of God and to usher in a new age of grace. And according to the prophet Zechariah in this new Messianic age, it would not only be the Jews who would keep the Feast of Tabernacles, but all the Gentiles as well, all that is who would hear and believe on Christ for salvation. And those who refuse to come, are not saved. Zechariah 14 says: "And it shall come to pass that everyone who is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall go up from year to year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Tabernacles. And it shall be that whichever of the families of the earth do not come up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, on them there will be no rain. If the family of Egypt will not come up and enter in, they shall have no rain; they shall receive the plague with which the LORD strikes the nations who do not come up to keep the Feast of Tabernacles. This shall be the punishment of Egypt and the punishment of all the nations that do not come up to keep the Feast of Tabernacles." Before it was only the Jews who were allowed to keep this Feast, for only they had been saved out of Egypt by God. But now it is all people, for Christ came to rescue the whole world from their sins, not just the Jews. And so even those who were the enemies of Israel, the figurative Egypt, would now become part of God's people by His grace; while those who obstinately refuse His gift of forgiveness and life are condemned whether Jew or Gentile.

Now does this mean that because Jesus has come and saved us, because He has fulfilled His own week long festival by suffering and dying for us during Holy Week, that we must now keep the annual Feast of Tabernacles each Fall? Not at all. For the Feast is no longer about one week each year, but is a continual feast in which we participate every time we receive Christ's Gospel and feast on the Sacrament of His Body and Blood. For now He comes to us through these humble means and fills both the temples of our churches and of our bodies with His saving and glorious presence. This is the New Feast of His Communion. And so we sing the same Psalm they sang long ago at the old Feast and that they shouted on that first Palm Sunday. We say it each time we celebrate this Feast in preparation to receive the Lord, singing: "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of

Sabaoth. Heaven and earth are full of Your glory. Hosanna, Hosanna, Hosanna in the Highest, Blessed is He, Blessed is He, Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord, Hosanna in the Highest”

When Solomon dedicated the Temple, and every day thereafter while it stood, the priests sang yet another verse from Psalm 118, saying: “Oh give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good, For His mercy endures forever.” And now, we too join their song which we sing after having taken communion, for Christ, the true God has come down to us to save us. He who died for us and rose again, now gives us this gift of salvation. Let us receive it with thanksgiving and keep this feast not just on Palm Sunday or during Holy Week, but always! Rejoice greatly; for Your King comes to you! He is just and He brings you salvation. Amen.

+ Soli Deo gloria +