

Sunday of the Passion

April 2, 2020

John 12:12-19



The Cry of the Church in Exile: Hosanna!
Save Us Now!

¹² The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. ¹³ So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!” ¹⁴ And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written,

¹⁵ “Fear not, daughter of Zion;
behold, your king is coming,
sitting on a donkey’s colt!” ¹

Dearly beloved in the Lord: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In some ways, Christians right now are like Israel in Babylonian captivity. In some ways I think we are like a church in exile. We are bereft of the familiar surroundings of our church building. And that means that not only are we social distancing, we are distant from the Divine Service. Today we do not celebrate with the usual trappings of Palm Sunday, no palms, no procession. We are removed from the Sacrament of the Altar. Like the Israelites who were taken up and moved to strange new surroundings in a distant land, we are overwhelmed by that fact that all the boundaries have shifted, the centre does not hold. Things are changing so

¹ Jn 12:12-15.

rapidly that we are vulnerable to despair, that we will gradually be overrun and overcome in anxiety and fear of the unknown. This is the church in exile, and especially now during Holy Week the church in exile feels out of touch with everything that we had and treasured.

But the church in exile is still an Easter church. Today is also called the Sunday of the Passion because we hear how Jesus was handed over to suffer and die for our sins. This year we hear that from a distance. But whether in person or online, the promises that God has made and kept in the sending of his only begotten Son are no different, even though we are for the present time removed from some of those gifts he would have us receive. This week especially we think of Holy Communion. So during this Holy Week we will focus our attention on understanding what it means to be a church in exile, but still a church of the Resurrection, the body of Christ.

It is Palm Sunday, today we mark the triumphal entry into Jerusalem when Jesus neared the completion of His journey to the cross. One word jumps out for us as the church in exile. The word is “hosanna.” “So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!”² In the New Testament we only see that word here and in the other Gospel accounts for Palm Sunday. What does hosanna mean? It is a cry for help. Psalm 118 says “Save us, we pray, O LORD!”³ The word

² Jn 12:13.

³ Ps 118:25.

there is “hosanna,” which means “save us” in Hebrew or Aramaic. Hosanna, O Lord! This is the cry that God will look with mercy upon his people who suffer, and offer them relief from all their afflictions. Save us O Lord! This is the cry of the church in exile. We cry to God, save us O Lord from this terrible pandemic. Guard and protect our hearts, preserve our faith, and prepare us for whatever what might come ahead, even unto death. Jesus enters in Jerusalem with these words: “Fear not,” your King is here. “Fear not,” for He comes for the shedding of His blood, to blot out the guilt of transgression, to restore life.

“Hosanna” the cry for help then becomes “hosanna” a shout of praise. For the multitudes gathered in Jerusalem that day their Messianic hope and dreams were realized in the coming of Jesus Christ. “Hosanna! Save us O Lord!” is also exclaimed as the grateful response of a people who now behold God’s mercy in the flesh, “sitting on a donkey’s colt.”⁴ Indeed, St. Luke writes in his own account of Palm Sunday that “the whole multitude of his disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen.”⁵ They had seen miracles, and signs, and wonders, and they had heard the Good News of the Gospel – Christ come for sinners. For you and me. In the same way, for the church in exile the praise of our Lord is never far from our hearts or on our lips, even though for now the joyous sounds of hymns and liturgy is temporarily suspended. For we too

4 Jn 12:15.

5 Lk 19:37.

know of the mighty deeds of our Saviour, and we know of the peace that passes all understanding that springs forth from the Word of life.

Those songs of praise even give way to jubilation, because the coming of the King heralds the defeat of our enemies, and now the “the King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst”⁶. We know that the crowd that gathers in Jerusalem to shout and wave palms is not ready for what will happen on Friday. They are in for a shock. The Son of Man will be glorified when He is lifted up on a cross. And then another shock awaits them on Sunday, when our Lord, through whom all things were made and all things redeemed, will rise again from the dead. Then there is celebration of life over death.

The joy of Easter is never far from the church, for every time we gather to receive the gifts of His Service we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord. Yes, even when we cannot gather in person, the Word of our Lord works faith in our hearts to grasp hold of the promise. Our baptismal grace remains. Repentance, the forgiveness of sins, and the fruit of the Spirit are all still ours. Jesus says, “If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also.”⁷

Yes, the church in exile is still an Easter church, always an Easter church. “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.”⁸ We turn towards Friday looking to

⁶ Zep 3:15.

⁷ Jn 12:26.

⁸ Jn 12:23.

the cross, still the church, the Body of Christ, separated for a short time, but still “fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God,”⁹ through Christ Jesus our Lord.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠ Soli Deo Gloria

⁹ Eph 2:19–20.