

## **Homily for Palm Sunday**

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**Sunday, April 5, 2020**

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In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, One God.

Yesterday we celebrated Lazarus Saturday, when our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, raises Lazarus from the dead. Somehow, I think the raising of Lazarus is the more important Feast.

The Raising of Lazarus is about our resurrection. The Entry into Jerusalem is about the King coming to His people, riding on the colt, and the terrible things that will be happening in the ensuing week. But the resurrection of Lazarus, that is completely about our resurrection.

Besides the fact that our Lord raised Lazarus from the dead, our Lord did this on the fourth day after Lazarus died. This is very significant. To the Jews, four days in the grave, was the point of no return. Someone might be able to be raised from the dead after three days, but after four days: surely not.

Lazarus was four days dead, and yet the Lord raised him.

The next day, today, our Lord came into Jerusalem with great fanfare. People cried out: "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!" This cry comes from Psalm 117 verses 25 and 26, which was associated with messianic expectation. It was recited daily for six days during the Feast of the Tabernacles, and seven times on the seventh day as branches were waved. Hosanna means, "Save, we pray!"

They put their garments down. They put the branches of trees and palms down to show their acceptance of Him as their King and as Messiah.

Visualising this scene, I couldn't help but think of what is happening in all our lives right now. Here in the UK, as in most other countries in Europe and the world, we are under lockdown because of the Corona virus pandemic.

These last couple of weeks, people in the UK have stood outside their homes at 8 pm on Thursday evenings for the "clapping for carers" campaign in support of NHS staff and other essential workers. A fine gesture indeed.

Still, this makes me think of Palm Sunday when our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ rode into Jerusalem with people gathering to see him and waiving palm fronds and calling him the Messiah. Less than a week later some of these same people would be shouting for his death.

And you might ask what has this got to do with people clapping for the NHS and other essential workers? Most of you will really be well meaning and supportive of what those NHS and other essential workers are doing in these very difficult times.

But there will be others who will be doing it not just to support our NHS workers, but rather as a way to salve their own guilty or not so guilty consciences. For some it will be to justify their own actions. Let us not forget the images we have all seen on TV and in newspapers of people having fights in supermarkets trying to get their hands on obscene amounts of toilet paper and other items.

Other people will have been buying large amounts of face masks and disposable gloves, because they believe that they need to protect themselves when they leave their homes. Or just simply because they think they are entitled or more deserving of protection than their fellow man. Some obviously will have medical issues and be more vulnerable because of this. Still it is not an excuse.

Many people think it is really disgraceful that the NHS is forced to expose their workers to Covid-19 because there are shortages of face masks and PPE. But some of those people might refuse an NHS worker or care worker, who has just finished a 12-hour nightshift or who is shopping on behalf of the vulnerable and the sick, to get ahead of them in the queue at the supermarket.

We all know that difficult times bring out the best in people, but also the worst. Some people, amongst them our very brave doctors, nurses and carers, are literally sacrificing themselves to help other less fortunate people. But there are also those who, acting like false prophets, would have us live in a kind of Orwellian 1984, who want any tiny trespasses of Government guidelines to be severely punished, and who revel in spreading doom and gloom.

And that is why I made this analogy. This is something we should think about in the coming days, especially as we are preparing ourselves for the crucifixion and resurrection of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

But let us return to Christ's entry into Jerusalem.

That same night, He did not stay in Jerusalem, but returned to Bethany. Why? Because he knew He was not accepted by the people. He knew that the ruling classes hated Him and that they wanted Him killed. And He would keep travelling into Jerusalem on the Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday when He would be arrested.

We all know that great evil was to come upon Jerusalem. The Chief Priests wanted Him arrested and killed. Judas would deliver our Lord into the hands of His enemies for 30 pieces of silver. Lies would be told and money would change hands. And Herod and Caiaphas would set up an evil friendship in the process.

But as Orthodox Christians, we know that our Saviour who rides into Jerusalem is really the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He is the Passover Lamb whose death and resurrection will conquer death itself.

Let us not forget that in today's Gospel we read about Mary, Lazarus' sister who anointed Christ with a very expensive ointment, usually reserved for the dead. How prophetic was that!

When our Lord entered Jerusalem, he did this with a clear mind, with compassion and singleness of purpose. He did not allow Himself to be distracted by the adulation of the crowd, in the knowledge that its praise would turn into hatred, nor by the fear of his inevitable suffering and death. He knew the outcome of his coming to Jerusalem.

What we see here is an act of supreme courage, extreme humility and the greatest of all the Divine virtues, love. If we did not understand the words of St. Paul in Philippians (2: 5-11) before this, we should consider them now: "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men. And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross."

This Messiah, this One who is truly anointed to save His people and the whole world, will be rejected by the leaders of the Jews and crucified under the authority of the Romans. And when He is lifted up upon the Cross, He will draw all who believe in Him— Jews, Gentiles, male, female, rich, poor, all nations, classes, and races—to the life of a Kingdom that transcends this world and our petty divisions.

He will not reign as a soldier, nor as a politician or a rich man. He will reign as a suffering servant, a slaughtered lamb, a despised victim of torture and capital punishment. The crowds are right on Palm Sunday to welcome Him as a conquering King in Whom God's promises will be fulfilled.

But they do not understand what kind of King He is and how He will conquer. For He rules from a cross and an empty tomb; instead of killing Roman soldiers, He kills death by allowing Himself to be killed; instead of a magnificent stallion fit for a king, He rides a humble donkey that would impress no one.

Holy Week is the climax of Jesus Christ's life and of, believe it or not, ours too. He goes to the cross for us; He dies and rises for our salvation, so that He can bring us the unending joy of eternal life, in order to defeat our ancient foe.

So, what is expected from us now? We are now expected to lay aside our usual distractions, excuses, and obsessions. We are expected to enter the passion of our Lord by worshipping Him in the services of the church, as well as in every thought, word, and deed this week.

Because of the Coronavirus scare, as parishioners we cannot attend church services, so instead we should all pray at home and watch live streamed services celebrated by the clergy in empty churches, read the Bible passages for Holy Week, and turn our attention to God and away from material things.

On Palm Sunday, it is clear who Jesus Christ is: The Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world. My question though is: How will we respond to Him as He goes to the cross for us? Hopefully, just like with Holy Communion, with the fear of God and faith and love, we will draw near and not abandon or disregard Him.

This will require us to focus and discipline ourselves by turning away from temptations, distractions, and unholy thoughts that become obstacles along our path. Nonetheless, we must follow St. Paul's guidance in Philippians 4:6, 7 to "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."

“Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, the king of Israel. Hosanna in the highest!”

Let us not forget that whatever it is we do here on earth, it is only temporary. What we need to do is to prioritise and place Christ the King as the primary concern in our lives. It is only when we will have done this that we will find true peace and happiness in this confused and complex world.

Amen.