

Palm Sunday: *Lifting Jesus Up* **by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle**

Prayer of Illumination

Holy God, our strength in suffering and our hope for salvation, lift up your Word of life and pour out your Spirit of grace so that we may follow faithfully along the way of the cross; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture: Luke 19:28-40 (RNJB)

When Jesus had said this he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. Now it happened that when he was near Bethphage and Bethany, close by the Mount of Olives as it is called, he sent two of the disciples, saying, 'Go to the village opposite, and as you enter it you will find a tethered colt that no one has ever yet ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, "Why are you untying it?" you are to say this, "The Lord needs it."' The messengers went off and found everything just as he had told them.

As they were untying the colt, its owners said, 'Why are you untying it?' and they answered, 'The Lord needs it.' So they took the colt to Jesus and, throwing their clothes on its back, they lifted Jesus on to it.

As he moved off, they spread their clothes in the road, and now, as he was approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples joyfully began to praise God at the top of their voices for all the works of power they had seen. They cried out,

*Blessed is he who is coming as King
in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven and
glory in the highest heavens!*

Some Pharisees in the crowd said to him, 'Teacher, rebuke your disciples,' but he answered, 'I tell you, if these keep silence, the stones will cry out.'

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – Palm Sunday: *Lifting Jesus Up*

Lent and Holy Week are spiritual seasons for us to take stock and ask ourselves:

How can I be a better me?

How can we as a community be a better us?

We do this best through prayer, making Christ's prayer in the garden, our prayer:

Abba Father,

thy will be done, not mine...

Thine, not mine.

It's a risky thing to utter this prayer and to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. There are risks of being misunderstood, risks of our reputation being questioned, risks of a toll taken on our popularity, risks of losing our cherished comfort. Even the risk of losing our lives. But as missionary and martyr Jim Elliot once said,

"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

To understand Jesus and what's really going on this Palm Sunday, we have to delve into our Hebrew roots. Amy Jill Levine's new book *Entering the Passion of Jesus: A Beginner's Guide to Holy Week* has been a big help in understanding the Jewish background of the first day of Holy Week.

For the last 10 chapters of Luke, Jesus has been slowly and methodically making his way to Jerusalem. Jesus is now on the outskirts of Jerusalem, near the Mount of Olives. It's no accident he's here--the Mount of Olives is the traditional place where the Messiah is to make his appearance. And nearby Bethany is the site where Jesus will ascend to the Father weeks after his resurrection. The Holy City is bursting at the seams with thousands upon thousands of pilgrims from around the world converging upon Jerusalem for Passover. Another name for Passover is the "Festival of Freedom," commemorating God's deliverance of the Hebrews from Pharaoh's slavery and oppression. Aware of this, Pontius Pilate will be riding into Jerusalem as well—but not on a donkey. Pilate's Passover presence was there to say, "You Jews may have been freed from Egypt, but you remain under Rome's royal thumb."

The people gathered by Jesus along the road from Bethphage and Bethany that led to the Sheep Gate in the northern part of Jerusalem. Once a lamb was brought through the Jerusalem Sheep Gate for sacrifice, there was no way out, no going back. It was a one-way street. It was through this sheep gate opening that lambs were brought for sacrifice. And so it was for Jesus. The Good Shepherd became the Sacrificial Lamb. The Lamb, riding on a donkey. The Spotless Lamb of God with the persevering humility of a donkey.

Each Passover, the high priest chose the best lamb to be the Paschal Lamb. The symbolism is clear: the real Paschal Lamb is Jesus! It's this spotless Lamb of God who will take away the sin of the world—past, present, and future, for all time. The people however had a very different agenda for their Coming King. They were convinced that Jesus would be the kind of Messiah who would wrest power from the Romans, crush them, establish the rule of law, and coronate himself as King. When

that didn't happen, the crowds were dismayed and disillusioned. But Jesus knew exactly what he was doing when he arranged for a donkey to ride into the Holy City. He knew the words of the prophet Zechariah like the back of his hand. Jesus was sending a clear message that he was the Prince of Peace coming in peace, just as the Prophet Zechariah foretold. Today was the day God's promises were being fulfilled.

In the Old Testament, Zechariah prophesies even more about the rule of the coming king, saying:
"... because of the blood of my covenant with you,
I will set your prisoners free."

In other words, the Triumphal Entry during Passover foreshadows The Last Supper when Jesus will speak these words in the Upper Room:

"This cup is the new covenant of my blood shed for you, for the forgiveness of sins."

Zechariah gives us even more clues about the Anointed King, centuries before the Messiah's appearing:

"Lo, your king comes to you
triumphant and victorious is he."

A better translation of the word "triumphant" is righteous. The king comes with the power of righteousness and justice—not just raw power. So really, the first day of Holy Week could be more accurately called the Righteous Entry, not the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. Zechariah describes this coming king as "humble" or "meek," riding on a donkey. There's a subtle and sturdy power to meekness. Meek is not weak. Remember, in the Beatitudes Jesus says the meek will inherit, what? ...the earth. There's a power to humility. The people praised Jesus for his works of power. Humility wields and works its quiet strength not for self, but for the good of others. The meek exert their might to heal, to teach, to listen to others, share with those in need, and serve rather than be served. Jesus exhibited humility by identifying more with the lowly than the high and mighty. He's the King of kings and Lord of lords, but he doesn't lord his position over others.

Zechariah continues and tells us that this coming king is "victorious." Again, the word victorious isn't the best translation from the Hebrew. An even better English word is saved. Or even the word savior. The names Hosea, Joshua, and Jesus come from this same root word of "God saves." So this king is not a successful king on the battlefield, he's a saving king. That's why the crowds shout out, "Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest!" Hosanna is a Hebrew exclamation meaning, "Save us, please" or "Save, we pray." Again, it comes from the same root word as Jesus. Jesus save us! You could even say: Jesus, Jesus us! We all need salvation from our sins for the future, and we all need in some form salvation for our present moment as well. God hears our Hosanna cries and answers them in Jesus:

Hosanna—Jesus save us now, we pray!

Save us from self.

Save us from suffering.

Save us from hopelessness.

Save us from loneliness.

Save us from poverty.

Save us from tyranny.

But we not only call out to Jesus. We're also called to follow Jesus in the Parade of Lambs into Jerusalem. Not just to watch from the sidelines and the sidewalks, but to join in the Prince of Peace's parade. But this is not all fun and games. Today's hero will be tomorrow's victim. Today Jesus is lifted up on a donkey. Tomorrow Jesus will be lifted up on a cross. Jesus already foretold this,

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

Each of us have a cross to bear. Taking up your cross means to willingly take up hardship and humiliation, even death—death to self—all for Jesus and his kingdom. The saving and righteous entry of King Jesus on a donkey is a very different path to victory than the world takes. The blood that will be shed is not the blood of enemies, but Christ's own blood shed for the sake of the world. With Christ's face set like flint, he steadily makes his way to Jerusalem and to the cross. He cannot and will not be stopped. You cannot stop the voices of praise of Jesus. You cannot stop the rocks from crying out. And you cannot stop the Christ from going to the cross. We all love "Palm Sunday" because of the parade of pomp and pageantry. But if you only attend on "Palm Sunday" and skip ahead to Easter Sunday and the empty tomb, you miss the important stuff. We too must walk the walk with Jesus the whole nine yards and doggedly stay focused on what matters most. We must let Lent do its work. We must let our crucified Lord do his work in us.

Immanuel, we're now in the home stretch—keep pressing on.

Dwell in the Monday-Saturday of Holy Week too—don't rush past those days.

Let us ride with Jesus to the Upper Room on Maundy Thursday, where he instituted the Lord's Supper and washed the disciples' feet and gave them a new commandment to love one another the Jesus way. Don't stop there—keep pressing on. Let us walk with Jesus, into the Garden of Gethsemane. And then carry our cross with him to Golgotha on Good Friday, where Jesus died that we might live. Then, and only then on Easter, can the stone be rolled away so we might escape the tomb and live the resurrection life Christ has made possible. But before we live, we must die.

For early Christian believers, to be baptized, you needed a three-year apprenticeship, just like the disciples had three years of learning from Jesus. Converts were baptized either at the Saturday Vigil on Easter Eve or on Easter morning when Christ's victory over the grave is celebrated. The earliest Christians used the language of "plunge, inundate, and immerse" when talking about baptism. These terms were often used in different ways in antiquity before the Christians begin to use it for baptism. It was used for drunkenness as in you are inundated with alcohol. It was also used of shipwrecks when they are finally plunged beneath the water. Can you imagine what it was like for them, in the midst of resurrection rejoicing, to be "inundated" into the water, "plunged" into the depths to die to self and rise to new life, truly forgiven and truly blessed?

As they rose out of the water, their mentor who led them to faith would whisper in their ear the secret sacred prayer disciples of Jesus were known for. You would only hear as much of "The Disciples' Prayer" as your mentor thought you could handle. The words were so revolutionary. Each word a gift. Each word a world of revelation. Maybe all you got whispered was,

"Our Father, who art in heaven."

Or maybe your three-year apprenticeship had been so exceptional that you heard,

“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

But however much of the prayer you received as your baptismal gift, you were sent on your way into the world to be fully “Christians” – “little Christs” set loose on the world to turn it upside down.

Just like Jesus did.

Amen.

The *Revised New Jerusalem Bible (RNJB)* is an English translation of the Bible published by Darton, Longman & Todd. Its current edition consists of the New Testament and the Psalms, and was released in February 2018, with the full Bible set to be released in 2020. It is a revision of the *Jerusalem Bible* and the *New Jerusalem Bible* done by the British biblical scholar and Ampleforth Abbey monk Henry Wansbrough.