

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

On this Palm Sunday 2021, we do well to remind ourselves that in the first century there was only one body of scripture for Jews: what Christians today call the Old Testament. Without a knowledge of that part of the Bible, it is very hard to really understand the New Testament so that we continue to view it in a kind of vacuum. The Sunday of the Passion is a prime example. We are largely unfamiliar with **Zechariah**, a minor prophet from that earlier era, but for purposes of understanding what is occurring on Palm Sunday, it is critical to know a bit about him, and to keep in mind these words of the prophet: **"He will cut off the chariot of Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations."**

Zechariah's prophecies took place in the period after the Babylonian Captivity in the 6th century B.C. Zechariah dated his writing to the period 520–518 BC. Eventually, freedom did come to many Israelites, and the first return to the homeland took place in 538 B.C., 60 years after the conquest of Judah, the destruction of the First Temple, and the expulsion of the Jews. When Zechariah emerged, he centered his interests on the rebuilding of the Temple. **The name Zechariah means "God remembered."** The return from exile is the theological premise of the prophet's visions which address the quality of life God wants his returned and renewed people to enjoy. The main emphasis is on the idea that God is at work and all His good deeds, including the construction of the Second Temple, are accomplished "not by might nor by power, but by (His) Spirit." Ultimately, YHWH plans to live again with His people in Jerusalem. He will save them from their enemies and cleanse them from sin.

Most Christian commentators who read Zechariah saw his predictions as Messianic prophecies which helped the Gospel writers understand Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection. According to Zechariah, a king would be coming to Jerusalem "humble and riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey." In Mark this is implied, and in the other Gospels it is quoted directly. This king, riding on a donkey, will banish war from the land --- no more chariots, war-horses, or bows. He will be the King of Peace. These ideas enrich our imagination as we try to envision the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem.

We need to see in our mind's eye two key components: a peasant procession led by Jesus and peopled by his enthusiastic followers, and coming from the east ("you don't spread cloaks on the road...or sing hymns of praise, or cut branches off trees for anyone other than royalty...for a welcoming king"); the other, an imperial procession led by Pontius Pilate, governor of the region, who arrived from the west at the head of his mighty Roman cavalry and soldiers. Jesus' procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate's proclaimed the power of empire.

You will recall that Jesus had no earthly goods to speak of, no money, no assets, not even the prospect of finding paying work and certainly no guards or even friends with the ability to protect him, whereas Pilate, the prefect, could afford whatever he needed for his private desires in addition to whatever it might take to maintain the peace and keep political enemies at bay. Even if Judea was of relatively low importance or prestige in the context of a vast first century empire, he still had at his disposal very large numbers of protectors. For example, it is estimated that he had at his command more than 3,000 soldiers – four cohorts of 800 men each. Pilate lived in the Roman city of Caesarea Maritime where life was familiar and comfortable for the occupiers, but he frequently traveled to Jerusalem, especially on important feast days. Thus, his arrival in the city occurred at the same moment when Jesus was entering by another direction in the company of his adoring crowd of followers. It was a classic example of two opposing forces meeting in an historic moment which in this case would be the prelude to the Passion of Our Lord ---- perhaps the most compelling of all the stories that have ever been told.

Now imagine that you had read Mark's account of Jesus' first day in Jerusalem, the day we call Palm Sunday, without knowing anything about its background in Zechariah's prophecy. You would no doubt completely misunderstand it. You might think Jesus was simply exhausted after a week-long walk from Galilee and needed help to complete the trip to the city. Or perhaps that he just wanted to be slightly higher than the crowd so that he could be seen. But the reality is that what we often call the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem on that Passover was primarily "an anti-imperial, anti-triumphal one, a deliberate lampoon of the conquering emperor entering a city on horseback through gates opened in abject submission. Imagine then how the mockery in which Jesus and his followers were engaged would have been viewed by the objects of their scorn.

Even if we take our cue from John's Gospel and view Jesus mounting a donkey as a gesture of humility in a prophetic signal protesting the triumphalist attitude of those bearing palms, the contrast remains: the humble servant compared with the powerful overlord who had it within his authority to impose a sentence of death on anyone disturbing the peace.

But those city gates opened "in abject submission" make clear that the Roman empire was the epitome of a domination system which ground down the powerless and lifted up a tiny share of the total population to a position from which they could exploit the poor with impunity. The process of peasant displacement through the growth of large estates was accelerating. Under the reign of Herod, there was a noticeable concentration of wealth in the hands of the ruling class while the conditions of life for the peasants visibly worsened. And though Jerusalem was the undisputed religious, political and cultural center of Israel, it was also the very locus of that domination system; the high priests, scribes and judges charged with representing the best interests of the people of Israel were corrupt and complicit in a vast system of overlordship which ran counter to everything Yahweh had always represented, and this meant that the Temple itself had become a center of economic exploitation and political oppression. As the

home of the monarchy and aristocracy, Jerusalem now embodied a betrayal of God's covenant with his people. God's passion for justice had been replaced by human injustice.

And these two alternative visions of humanity, these two competing views of governance, these two opposing versions of justice were symbolized by that peasant procession in juxtaposition with the imperial one as they collided on the streets of Jerusalem on that opening day of Passover some two thousand years ago. The Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ commenced on that day; the domination system was about to crush the hopes of the peasant gathering. But that crushing blow would not be fatal. Because the God who was watching over Jesus and his followers would bring vindication in the end. And that is the heart-wrenching and ultimately uplifting story we are about to re-tell and re-live in Holy Week 2021. We return to it each church year in this holiest of seasons because it is at the heart of our faith.

Almighty and everliving God, in your tender love for the human race you sent your Son our Savior Jesus Christ to take upon him our nature, and to suffer death upon the cross, giving us the example of his great humility: Mercifully grant that we may walk in the way of his suffering, and also share in his resurrection; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sources:

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