

The Real Reason Why the Lord Suffered

a Sermon on Palm Sunday, by the Rev. Michael Gladish
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In the Gospel of Luke (19), in the story of the Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, we read that as He drew near the city of Jerusalem **He wept over it. He literally cried**, saying, "If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes."

This was not the first time the Lord wept, or shed tears. Famously, the shortest verse in the Bible occurs in John 11, not long before this where we read only that "Jesus wept" when the people showed Him where they had laid the body of Lazarus. They assumed that this was because of His love for Lazarus, but in fact, the context shows that it was because of his love and compassion for all of them and His overwhelming sadness that they did not recognize His power to heal and raise every one of them from the dead.

Turning back to an earlier time in Luke, chapter 13, though it doesn't say that He wept, He was clearly filled with grief and sorrow over the state of the church. There, in the midst of a series of parables, some of which predict the final judgment on the Jewish religion, on His way to the capitol Jesus had said "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate; and assuredly, I say to you, you shall not see Me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

Notice the reference to the celebration we call Palm Sunday, but in this case a direct quotation from Psalm 118 referring to "the Stone which the builders rejected, (which) has become the chief cornerstone" (vv.22-24).

It really makes you wonder what kind of a celebration this was on the original Palm Sunday. Everything seemed to be going so well. But the Lord knew all along what was going to happen, and He was filled with sorrow not for Himself but for the people in that they had no idea what His real purpose was (see Matt. 21:42-44).

We can't emphasize this enough: the Divine love is a consuming love for all others outside of itself. Thus God, in the person of Christ, is completely incapable of feeling sorry for Himself! Rather His sorrow was because of people's disbelief of the spiritual things He was teaching them.

So in Luke 23, as He was carrying His cross on the way to Calvary, many, especially women, "mourned and lamented Him," but He replied (from under the weight and burden of the cross), "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For indeed, the days are coming in which they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, the wombs that never bore, and the breasts which never nursed....'" And as you know, finally, when He was actually being crucified Jesus said "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

With this in mind there are two concepts in the story of Palm Sunday that are really important to understand. First of all, it is the prelude to the crucifixion, and...

1. Most Christians regard the crucifixion as a glorious event full of the promise of redemption for all mankind because in that one act of supreme love Jesus atoned for all the sins of the human race, past, present and future, appeasing the anger of God, the Father by His suffering the punishment that others deserved. This is called “the vicarious atonement” because it is the suffering of one person on behalf of another, so that the other, no matter how guilty, can go free. The New Church totally rejects that whole idea. We certainly believe that the Lord suffered on our account, **but He did not suffer because HE was hurt**, He suffered because the people He came to save could not understand or accept Him, and so He knew that THEY would be hurt. As it says in Matthew 21 about the Stone that the builders rejected, “Whoever falls on this stone will be broken; but on whomever it falls, it will grind him to powder” (v. 44).
2. Still, just as the Lord knew what the people were going to do to Him, He knew the benefits that would be possible for them if He allowed them to do this awful thing. And those benefits were NOT freedom from guilt or responsibility, in fact they were just exactly the opposite! For He knew also that He would be raised from the dead (He had reminded His disciples of this many times), and He knew the impact that this would have on them, so that seeing Him again they would recognize their enormous mistake and come at last to believe in Him and follow Him **and do as He commanded them.**

Do you remember the first words of the angels when the disciples found the empty tomb? – or the first words of the Lord Himself when they met Him on the road? – or the first thing He said when He joined them in the upper room after the resurrection? Again and again it was “Fear not!” or “Peace be unto you!” Quite simply, when they saw Him they were scared to death (Luke 24:37) – and not just because they thought they were seeing a ghost, but almost certainly, too, because they knew they had betrayed Him, and now, whether ghost or real, here He was, and they must have expected retribution.

But of course the Lord’s message was as calm and consistent and reassuring as it had always been, only now with the added force and impact of His resurrection as a proven fact. Paraphrasing, what He said was, “Now can you see?” “Now can you understand?” “Look and see My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Handle Me and see, for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see I have” (Luke 24:39). He knew that they would have a hard time believing in Him; He knew that they would betray Him; and He knew that the one thing that might convince them was His resurrection. So He said, “Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47).

“Repentance and remission of sins.” Remission is another word for forgiveness. It means letting go. Sending away. Of course the Lord never did have any bitterness or resentment toward the disciples, but in demonstrating that by His compassion in the resurrection He was able to inspire the disciples to let go of THEIR guilt and get on with the business of living according to His teachings. In other words, BEING forgiven for their own betrayal of Him, it was now easy – and wonderful – for them to be able to teach forgiveness in His name to everyone!

Again, it was not about Jesus suffering on their behalf to appease God the Father, it was about God Himself in the person of Christ anticipating all that would go wrong, allowing it to go wrong *for the sake of human freedom*, and yet all the while working – through His grief and sadness – to convince everyone willing to be convinced that what He taught is good, and true, and necessary for eternal life.

But now, let's come back to the events of Palm Sunday specifically. The story is told in Matthew 21, Mark 11, Luke 19 and John 12, each time with slight and interesting variations. We've already reviewed the main points for the children – about the Lord riding into the city on a donkey and great crowds going before and after Him waving branches of trees and laying them and some of their own garments down as a path for Him on the road. In most Bibles this is called “the triumphal entry” because it was the custom in those days for a new king coming to his coronation to ride on a donkey and to be received in this way.

It's interesting because almost everything in the story has something to do with the knowledge and use of TRUTH: the garments and leaves of the trees all represent truth in the form of knowledge, the donkey truth in the form of reasoning, and a king rules his people according to the laws of the land, which are also forms of truth (or at least, their understanding of the truth).

But the people – both His friends and His enemies – all thought that the Lord was coming into Jerusalem to take over from Herod as a worldly king, ruling in the world according to worldly ideas of the truth. They were thrilled about this because they hated Herod and they wanted to see his government overthrown.

They were missing the whole point, of course, but even so there was an important purpose served by this outwardly happy procession, and that is that it represented, even if only outwardly, the deeper reality that the Lord **is** our king, that He **is** meant to rule in our lives, and that in spite of all this **He will only rule with us if we let Him do so!** He does not demand. He does not compel. He doesn't even resist if we determine to shut Him out of our lives. He will allow us to do that. But in doing so He will be terribly sad, and we can even imagine Him still today *weeping* over what we are missing if we reject Him and all that He represents.

In fact, our spiritual lives today are filled with changes of state not unlike the drastic changes that took place in the story leading up to the Lord's resurrection. And we can relate them specifically to the way we receive the Lord in His new revelation of the Writings for the New Church.

1. First there is a real sense of excitement and promise in these wonderful new doctrines. They answer our questions. They minister to us and give us hope. They open our eyes, free us from spiritual corruption and restore our sense of well-being. They expose the weaknesses and falsities of other faiths, which gives us a kind of proud satisfaction. We begin to expect great things.
2. But then we begin to experience disappointments. The teachings are challenging. They confront us as the Lord confronted the Pharisees, criticizing, even condemning our worldly attitudes. We begin to feel that too much is expected of us! And we find the cynicism of the world hard to resist. Maybe it is all just a fantasy after all. Maybe if we force the Lord's hand He will respond by overwhelming our spiritual enemies. Maybe,

like Judas, we say, “Lord if You are who You say you are, deal with this!” But He doesn’t. And so we think He doesn’t care. We lose heart, we lose faith and we turn away from the truth. We give up. We allow the Lord in our lives to be put to death – tortured, crucified.

3. The Lord, however, does not leave us. And if, in spite of everything, some affection for His truth remains, He can and will appear again, His truth restored to life, the whole body of His teaching miraculously transformed, speaking to us as before but with new meaning as we see the power of His Word.

So we vacillate back and forth, believing, doubting and believing again; accepting as long as it is comfortable to do so, rejecting when the going gets tough, and accepting again when we can see more clearly.

This is not to say that we **should** vacillate like that, but the Lord knows we will, and He knows that the doubts and temptations are all part of our spiritual growth. So He perseveres with us and never condemns us in spite of our mistakes. Of course, we may condemn ourselves through a final choice to reject His love, but the story of Palm Sunday shows that His love for us is constant and His determination to help us is unrelenting.

HE was not thrilled by the events of that day, for He knew the excitement was all superficial, and He knew what was going to happen next. But looking back on it now, and thinking also of the Lord coming in to the centre of our spiritual lives by means of careful thought and application of the truths of His Word, we can rejoice with real conviction and be glad that He has come again to teach anew and to lead with power and glory, to restore His kingdom – not His worldly kingdom but His heavenly kingdom – to us.

Amen.

Lessons: Matthew 21:1-19
Children’s Talk: The Story of Palm Sunday
& How to Make a Palm Cross

Psalm 118:1-4, 22-29
Arcana Caelestia #9212:6