

13 April 2003
Palm / Passion Sunday

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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Homily #1:

Based on Palm Sunday readings: Zechariah 9:9-10, Philippians 2:5-11, and mark 11:1-10.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today and all this Holy Week, we will once again ponder Jesus' passion. We will ponder the fact that He who entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday hailed as a king, leaves Jerusalem later that week condemned as a criminal, carrying His own cross. And we will ponder that great fall. . . . But far more important this week than how you look at Christ, is how Christ looks at you. That He looks at you as a person worthy to suffer for; worthy to be humiliated for; worthy to die for. Surely, you do not consider yourself worthy of that – that your King whom you rebel against, and sin against, would come and lay down His life for you! And yet it is exactly that that we ponder today and this week. That is exactly what happened. That Christ, in His great love, looks at you and sees a person worthy of His own life! He would rather you live, than He live!

And so we heard first thing this evening of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday – or what is also sometimes called His "Triumphal Entry." And with that entry, we see what kind of a King Jesus is, how He looks at us. . . . For compare His entry with the "triumphal entry" we saw on television this week – the entry of our troops into Baghdad. They entered with armor and might, with weapons of force and bulletproof vests, and toppled a symbolic statue with chain and strength. It was an impressive demonstration, designed for all to see who was the strongest, the conquerors. . . . But our Lord's triumphal entry was quite different. Seated on a donkey's colt, with palm branches, His entry was not designed to instill fear, but to show Him as a king at one with His people. Come to serve His people. Come not to fight, but to die. For ***"though He was in the form of God, [He] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men."***

For He is a King who desires not to be served, but to serve His servants. He is a King who desires not to save His own life at the expense of His servants, but to save their lives at the expense of His own. For that is how your King looks at you – as a person worthy

of suffering for, and being humiliated for, and dying for. . . . Later, after He is arrested and put on trial, He will be *accused* of being a King; that will be the charge against Him that eventually results in His crucifixion. But if they only knew what kind of a King He was! A serving King, a dying King. Come to bring revolution not on the earth, but in the hearts of all people. That we may live in His Kingdom. . . . They accused Him of being a King in order to kill Him. What a great irony! Because little did they know, that is exactly why their King came!

(We continue with the hymn.)

Homily #2:

Based on the first half of the Passion reading according to St. Mark, Mark 14:1-42.

It seems only right that what began in a garden should also begin to come to a conclusion in a garden. For it was in the Garden of Eden that sin began, when sin took hold of the sinless Adam and Eve and bound them in its grip. And from then on, not only them, but every person descended from them, including you and me, would live in that grip of sin, unable to set ourselves free. . . . And so too in the Garden of Gethsemane, sin would again take hold of the sinless one, Jesus, and try to hold Him in its grip. In Eden, Satan used a serpent, in Gethsemane, he used Judas. But his goal was the same. . . . Except this time, he would fail! For although Jesus would die on the tree of the cross, sin and its evil henchmen named death and the grave could not hold Jesus in their strong hands. For He was stronger. And so whereas Satan used the fruit of the tree to bring death to all people, Jesus turns the tree of death into the tree of life, and gives the fruit of His cross for all to eat and drink and live! And whereas Satan gave with deception and lies, Jesus gives in truth, saying – as we heard and will hear again in a short time: ***“Take, eat, this is My body; Take and drink, this is My blood.”*** The fruits of His cross given for the life of the world.

Also interesting in what we heard in the reading is that Jesus once again separated Peter, James, and John from the other disciples, and had them follow Him higher up the Mount of Olives. And I wonder what was going through their minds, because Jesus had separated them out once before, to go up the Mount of Transfiguration, and what glory they saw then! And I wonder if they thought that same thing was going to happen again! . . . But in reality, the glory they saw then pales in comparison to the glory that is about to unfold before their eyes now. For now they are about to see the glory of Jesus bound and arrested. The glory of Him bound to the cross. And they glory of Him bound into the grave. And although that doesn't sound glorious, that is Jesus' true glory. Because

only by seeing Him bound do we understand how Jesus sees us – and that is as people who are bound in sin, and who need to be set free. And so Jesus allows Himself to be bound as we are bound, so that in His breaking free and conquering sin, death, and the devil in His resurrection, we too would be free.

So as the disciples sleep, Jesus prays. He would not be caught unawares. He does what we are unable to do. He drinks the cup of suffering and death that we are unable to drink, and gives us the cup of the New Testament in His blood, to give us life. And what began in a garden now begins to come to a conclusion in a garden – for that is His Father’s will, that he take our place with us in death, that we might have His place, with Him, in Heaven.

(We continue with the hymn.)

Homily #3:

Based on the second half of the Passion reading from St. Mark, Mark 14:43 – 15:20.

Peter denies Jesus three times. He denies being with Him, he denies knowing Him, he denies being associated with Him in any way. And these denials are carefully portrayed and spelled out for us, and not only in Mark’s Gospel, but also in Matthew and Luke – and not just to tell us something about Peter, but to tell us something about Jesus. For after Peter’s third denial, Luke includes the detail: ***“And the Lord turned and looked at Peter.”***

Remember I said earlier that far more important this week than how you look at Christ is how Christ looks at you. So what do you think was in His eyes when just then He looked at Peter? And what do you think is in His eyes when He looks at us? For we are not so different than Peter, denying our Lord. Denying perhaps by what we say, like Peter, but perhaps more often by what we do not say, when we choose to stay silent and not speak. Or perhaps we deny by what we do, or by what we choose not to do. As we confessed earlier, *“We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone.”* So how does Christ look at us?

Perhaps we find the answer when Jesus was looking down upon us from the cross. Looking down at those who denied Him, at those who put Him there, at those too scared to approach from a distance, at those who were making fun of Him and taunting Him, at those who were afraid to stand up for Him, at those who were false witnesses against Him, at those who shouted ***“Crucify Him.”*** Jesus looked down at them as He looks at us,

and spoke what was in His eyes and in His heart – ***“Father, forgive them.”***

That is how Jesus looked at Peter, and how He looks at us – as sinners in need of His forgiveness. And not just little sinners, or insignificant sinners, or not-so-bad sinners. No, but filthy, rotten sinners, who stink and reek of the death and decay of our rebellion and selfishness and sin. He sees it all. We might wish that we could hide some of our sin, but no, He sees it all. And still He looks at us and says, ***“Father, forgive them.”*** . . . Luther said that no article of faith is as hard to believe as this, because they do not touch us as this one does. For to believe that God is Almighty, that the Son of God became a man, that the Holy Spirit comes to us, to believe in the body and blood of Christ in Holy Communion, the gift of the Spirit in Baptism, those may be hard to understand, but yes, we believe them. But why would He forgive me, after what I’ve done; after what I’ve left undone; because of who I am! Why would He do that for me? Surely I must do something, I must make up for it, I must become *worthy* . . .

No. The Lord turned and looked at you, and said ***“Father, forgive them.”*** And you are forgiven. Faith knows not the why, but simply clings to that promise. So do just that, not only this week, but every week – cling to that promise of forgiveness and life through Jesus death and resurrection. And so clinging, you will rightly ponder Jesus’ passion, His passion accomplished not just for all, but most especially accomplished for you. In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds steadfast in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

(Nicene Creed)