

4 April 2004
Palm / Passion Sunday

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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Homily #1

Based on Palm Sunday readings: Deuteronomy 32:36-39, Philippians 2:5-11, and Luke 19:28-40.

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

To be successful in our world today is often compared to climbing a ladder. There is the corporate ladder, and the ladder of success. And the higher you go, the more successful you are. . . . How utterly fantastic, then, that this week; this Holy Week; the most important week in the Christian year, is the exact opposite of that. The most important week in the Christian year is about suffering, humiliation, and death. For in order for Christ to be “successful,” He would not climb up the ladder, but down. Down to us. Down to our depths. Down, not to the best of us, but all the way down to the worst of us. This week truly reveals what Christianity is all about: it is not about us trying to ascend to a God high in the heavens, but about God, in mercy and compassion, descending to us. It is about ***“Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, 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. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”*** And so Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, hailed as a King; but knowing full well that His coronation will be on a cross; and that He will be anointed not with oil, but with His own blood.

For you, He does this. For you. To satisfy divine justice. To reconcile you to God, your Heavenly Father. That the blood He sheds would be the blood to wash away your sins. . . . And He is successful! The proof is the empty tomb we will celebrate next Sunday. For the empty tomb shows us that divine justice has been satisfied! You have been reconciled to your Heavenly Father – the barrier of sin and death done away with. His blood has washed away your sins. You are redeemed, restored, forgiven.

So do you want to be successful? Note carefully, then, what St. Paul has written: ***“Have this mind among yourselves.”*** What mind? This mind of Christ. For success is not in how high we can climb, where position, power, prestige, and greed have become the false gods of so many. No, it is to be where God is – the God who has come down to us. It is, therefore, to be on our knees. To receive Him as He comes to us in Word and Sacrament.

To serve as we have been served. To repent. For those who so live in Christ Jesus here, will then also be exalted with Him. For as Jesus showed us, the way to Heaven is not up – but down. For in Jesus, Heaven came down to us. (*We continue with the hymn.*)

Homily #2

Based on the first half of the Passion reading according to St. Luke, Luke 22:39 – 23:25.

This portion of the passion reading begins and ends with a startling contrast. It begins with Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, praying in agony, praying “*Not my will, but yours [Father], be done.*” And then it ends with Pilate delivering Jesus over to those shouting for His crucifixion – delivering Him over to their will. It seems to be a battle of wills: the will of God versus the will of man.

Thy will, or *my* will, be done? It is the same struggle that exists in each one of us. The Christian in us, with his new will, wants my will and God’s will to be one and the same; to follow Him and His ways; to trust that His will is better than my will. . . . But the old man in us, the sinful man, wants no such thing! This is the “my will be done” determination (or stubbornness!) that lives in each one of us, and that will use whatever tools we have in our arsenal to accomplish – not what God wants – but what I want. . . . You know that struggle. You live it. And don’t we, more often than not, want God to bend to our will, instead of bending our will to His?

And if Jesus, who was without sin, struggled so and needed strengthening, how much more we, who are weighed down with sin, need the strengthening and faith that only God can provide?

And so we pray as Jesus prayed, “*Thy will be done.*” *Thy* will, not *my* will. And it is in Christ crucified that this is done. In Christ crucified our old sinful man is slain and his stubborn will broken, that a new man may arise and live. In Christ crucified our old sinful man is starved, and our new man fed and strengthened. In Christ crucified we are forgiven and I am set free from my old will, to live in God’s will, His perfect will. In Christ crucified this is accomplished. As I am joined to Christ crucified in Holy Baptism; as Christ crucified is joined to me in Holy Communion; as Christ crucified is given and applied to me in Holy Absolution and as His Word lives in me. In all these ways, His will is done.

And so when Pilate handed Jesus over to the will of the crowd, it was not as it appeared. It was not their will being done after all, but God’s will. For it was His will for His Son to die. It was His will that by the cross we would be saved. It was His will; His good and gracious will; His good and perfect will. . . . My will leads only to death. His will leads

through death to life. And so we pray, as Jesus did, and as He taught us. We pray, for we must. We pray, for there is no other way: Thy will be done. (*We continue with the hymn.*)

Homily #3:

Based on the second half of the Passion reading from St. Luke, Luke 23:26 – 23:56.

“Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, “Certainly this man was innocent!”

That is a rather strange reaction, don't you think? Usually the death of an innocent person is an occasion for remorse and regret. When the death penalty is wrongly applied and an innocent person executed, God is usually cursed, not praised! And yet that is exactly what this centurion did. This Roman soldier, who had just taken part and was complicit in a wrongful execution, **praises God**. Because He knew what He had just witnessed. He knew, Matthew tells us, that this was not just a man innocent of a few, certain charges, but the altogether innocent Son of God. The Son of God crucified for the sin of the world. The Son of God crucified for the life of the world. The Son of God crucified for him. And he knew that this crucifixion would not be held against him! No, the crucified One had said so Himself: ***“Father, forgive them.”*** This centurion knew. He had been given the gift to faith. And so the cross became an occasion not for remorse and regret, but for praise.

And so too for you and I. This Holy Week, we are not like the crowds that had gathered to watch the crucifixion, and who then ***“returned home beating their breasts.”*** No! We are the centurion. We are the ones who take part and are complicit in this execution because of our sins. We are the ones whose death penalty has just been wrongly applied to this innocent man. And yet we praise God! Because we know what this means! Because we have been given the gift of faith. And we know that this week is the most glorious week of all the year, for this is the week when God's love is put on display for us to see. **The love of God the Father**, who provides a substitute to die for our sins in our place. **The love of God the Son**, who lays down His life for us. And **the love of God the Holy Spirit**, who leads us to Christ on the cross and gives us the faith to believe that this is an innocent man. This is the Son of God. This is my God in whom I trust. The God who came down to save me, and did not demand that I climb to Him. The God whose will it was die in my place. The God who died my death, that I may live His life.

For all this, how can we do anything else but praise God? And how we praise Him most

of all in not in word or deed – although this He does desire. We praise Him most by simply receiving His gifts. By receiving what He has come to give us. By receiving Him, and in Him, His forgiveness, life, and salvation. That is what God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – most desires. And not just this week, but every week. That we see what has taken place, and praise God! That we repent and live in Him. A life we live here and now, but because of Christ Jesus, a life which we will also live for eternity.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.
(We continue with the hymn.)