

FACING JERUSALEM:
HIS AND OURS
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The traditional picture of the Palm Sunday scene is a glorious one. With the triumphal entry, one can imagine a fanfare of trumpets mixed with the shouts of children. The waving palm branches that John mentions have always symbolized victory and triumph. Greeks used the palm as a token of victory. Hebrews used palm branches in the old feast of Tabernacles, the harvest celebration, in which arbors of Palms recalled the tents in which the children of Israel lived in the wilderness on their way to victory in the promised land. The palm symbolized fruitfulness because it was constantly green and flourishing. And so the Psalmist says “the righteous shall flourish like the palm tree.” It was a favorite decoration in the religious art of the Jews. And so Ezekiel sees the palm prominently in his vision of the new temple to be restored in Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity. All along the walls are carved palm trees and cherubim, symbols of the power and victory of God’s promise. The Palm Sunday scene is a joyous picture of victory. We imagine the bright colors of the clothing of the people, sunlight sparkling over the first soft greens of springtime. This is the season of the resurrection of the springtime and the rebirth of new hope and joy in the human heart. It is the time when spring unlocks the flowers to paint the laughing soil. And joy is in the faces of the throngs who have come to pay homage to their Lord and King.

But, as we know, that Palm Sunday scene changed. Like the cherubim of Ezekiel’s vision, where there were two faces turned toward the Palm, one the face of a man, the other, that of a lion, there were two kinds of reception of Jesus, one of joy, the other of growing uneasiness, rejection and hate. Just as the bright golden warmth of a spring day is chilled as the shadow of a cloud obscures the landscape, so the warm joy of Palm Sunday is darkened as a shadow is cast over the scene - the shadow of the cross.

This is the note of somberness that dulls the bright colors of the Palm Sunday scene. We sometimes think the picture would be better if we could remove that shadow - happier somehow. And yet as we survey the whole drama of Passion Week, we know that without the shadow of the cross, the glory of the Resurrection would not be possible; without the stormy discord of that dark Friday when the earth trembled, the wondrous resolution of the angelic voice of Easter morn, saying, “He is risen” could not have occurred - without the cross there could have been no crown. And so with the eye of faith we take a deeper look at that Palm Sunday scene, and the going up to Jerusalem, the facing of Jerusalem, takes on a deeper meaning - not one of sheer joy and happiness, but one of strong and serene confidence in victory over evil. Facing Jerusalem reminds us that we march to the call of duty to God, not dance to the piping of amusements, that we live not to attain empty enjoyments, but rather to achieve goodness and enduring happiness. And so the colors of the scene take on a deeper hue, not so joyous, perhaps, but in a truer light.

As we view the scene again in the larger perspective, we are impressed with Jesus’ firm, adamant conviction that He must go to Jerusalem. He did not have to even to fulfill scripture - the choice

was His to make. He was even advised not to go by Peter. It was in Caesarea Philippi that Jesus told his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer there many things by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and suffer death and rise again. And then when Peter said, "Heaven forbid Lord, this shall not happen to you," remember what Jesus answered? "Away with you Satan! You are a stumbling block to me. You think as men think, not as God thinks." This event shows plainly that it was not an easy decision for Jesus to make, to face Jerusalem and the suffering involved. The temptation must have been great to take another road - one north, perhaps, back home to the countryside of Galilee. To be sure no great works could be wrought there because of their unbelief in their local prophet, but there Jesus at any rate would be free from the cruel Roman power resident in Jerusalem. He could find refuge in the bosom of His family and enjoy old associations. But Jesus knew "you can't go home again." More important, He knew that one cannot avoid the tasks God sets before us. The temptation to do so must have been great. Why else would He scold Peter so severely as the tempter, Satan himself? - Peter who loved his Master so. And the later scene of Christ's agony in the Garden of Gethsemane shows that this was indeed a terrible road for Jesus to travel as He looked forward to the suffering on the cross. But, as the Gospels tell us, Jesus resolutely, steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem, refusing to avoid the hard road, the hard tasks ahead.

There is a lesson here for every follower of Jesus. Just as there was a Jerusalem in His life which He as the Son of God could not avoid, so there is a Jerusalem in the lives of each of us which we as children of God and heirs of Christ may not conscientiously avoid. We cannot avoid the Jerusalems in our lives. Following the Master does not mean avoiding them but facing them, not evading them but mastering them. The Palm Sunday lesson for us is - face your Jerusalem; steadfastly set your face to go up to Jerusalem in the firm confidence that the power of God through Christ in us can transform our Jerusalem from an arena of suffering and torment to a scene of victory and triumph.

There are those Jerusalems common to every life which we cannot avoid, which we must face. There is the Jerusalem of failure, of sickness, of death, of sorrow. When these come to us, the strong and courageous thing to do is to face them, endure them, as Jesus did his Jerusalem with patience and hope and faith - and in this faith gain a new strength and life and victory. We can try to refuse to face our Jerusalems, but we cannot really escape them, for in doing so, we find that they have overcome us, and we have not shared in the promise of Jesus in overcoming the world.

A cherished plan, for example, goes wrong; a dream of our lives is shattered, an effort honestly and sincerely made meets rebuff and failure. Two courses are open to us. We can in bitterness and recrimination turn aside from our goal only to find the cancer of disappointment gnawing at our spirits. Or we can face our Jerusalems - look to see why the plan went wrong, why the dream was broken, why our effort failed. And with the help of God we may see through the tragedy some measure of victory and triumph. Perhaps the plan was wrong to begin with, perhaps the dream of false one, the effort misplaced. God, by helping us measure our motives by the yardstick of His purposes, will help us to see the truth. Perhaps the failure was due to our own discouragement and feelings of inadequacy. God will show us the power of the Spirit upon

which we can draw for a new and more confident effort. The point is - only by facing our Jerusalem, can we triumph over it.

The same is true when we face the Jerusalem of chronic illness, and the prospect and actuality of death in a loved one or ourselves. Again, we can try to turn aside from the hard teachings of patience and faith which these experiences offer. We can protest and lament to no avail - except to make ourselves more miserable. Or we can courageously face the Jerusalem before us and find even in the midst of these evils the occasion for the power, the grace, the love and mercy of God to shine through. Illness can be the occasion for learning new strengths and patience, and death itself something to be overcome by the power of faith in the love of God.

The lesson of Palm Sunday is that we must face our Jerusalem. When we try to avoid or evade it we are overcome by the threat of the evil event. But the promise of Palm Sunday is that the power of God works through the Jerusalem in our life to transform it and ourselves in the spirit of triumph and victory over evil. We need not be determined, conformed by the evil of the Jerusalem we face: rather we can be transformed through the overcoming of the evil - facing our Jerusalem.

The Palm Sunday seen is one of triumph and properly so. The King of Glory breaks through the world of history and enters in triumph. The scene becomes darkened, we know, as the shadow of the cross of Good Friday looms larger and larger. But we know too, that the cross itself is the occasion for the transforming power of God. This becomes luminous as the sign of the ultimate victory. "In the world," says Jesus, "you will have tribulation - but be of good cheer. I have overcome the world."

Today we are celebrating the ordinance of baptism. It is an occasion to rejoice in the decisions for Christ that are about to be made, and also to reflect anew on our own commitments. Let us all remember in our faith as Christians that we are committed to trust in the redemptive power of God's love. This does not mean we will never have to face Jerusalems anymore. It does mean that God's love will enable us to transform them, and ourselves, from arenas of defeat, to scenes of victory, from anguish to serenity in the love of God, which passes all understanding.

Call to Worship

Lift up your heads, O ye gates

Yea lift them up, ye everlasting doors:

And the King of glory will come in.

Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts,

He is the King of glory

O God, we open with joy the gates of our souls to let the King come in. Not for a passing hour of triumph would we receive Him, to send Him hence with broken heart and frustrate purpose, but we welcome Him to abide forever as Lord and King. Save us from the hypocrisy that sings Hosanna in the temple, and cries "crucify him" in the marketplace. Save us from the sham that praises with the lips and betrays with the deed. When the palms have withered, may we find ourselves still with Thee.