

THE DAY OF THE LORD
Luke 19: 28-44

In Luke 9 we are told Jesus turned his face toward Jerusalem. On Palm Sunday he finally arrives just east of the City of David. This was not his first time to see Mount Zion, but it was certainly his last. As Luke tells the story, the infant Jesus had been taken by his parents to the Temple to offer sacrifices on his behalf. Then, the twelve-year old Jesus went yet again with his parents and the other pilgrims to the Temple for the Passover feast. Our reading today marks the third and final occasion for Jesus to enter Jerusalem, the city of his destiny. This is the city where prophets are stoned, the city Jesus would have gathered to himself as a “hen gathers a brood under her wings.” Now Jerusalem will gather up Jesus and take him to his grave.

There is real poignancy to Jesus’ regal entry into Jerusalem. On the one hand it is indeed a “triumphant entry” filled with the joyful praise of Jesus’ followers. His disciples were praising God for all the miracles they had seen their Master perform. The other three Gospels tell us that his followers spread leafy branches and palm fronds on his path. Only Luke tells us that garments are laid on the ground, a makeshift kind of red carpet, for the One who comes in the name of the Lord. He is mounted on a donkey, recalling the words of the prophet Zechariah (9:9): “Lo, your king comes to you, triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey.”

The people quote from that memorable processional hymn, Psalm 118: “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord. Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest.” This is what pilgrims sang as they approached the City of David. It is a word of welcome to the One who comes in peace.

On the other hand, there is deep sadness in Jesus’ face. He knows, he knows like no one else, that he is riding squarely into the jaws of death. He knows of the opposition gathering about him, the Pharisees who rebuke his disciples for their tumultuous praise. And to his critics he replies, “I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out.” The sadness overwhelms Jesus as he considers not just his own fate, but the fate of that city set on a hill. He begins to weep as he broods, “If you had only

recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.”

So this day of triumph is also a day of reckoning. It reveals a fatal blindness that will lead eventually to ramparts, destruction, and death. All because Jerusalem “did not recognize the time of your visitation from God.” The death of Jesus and the subsequent destruction of Jerusalem are linked in the mind of the One who comes on this day of the Lord.

So this is a bittersweet moment of triumph. The unbridled jubilation of his followers surrounding him, the cloaks and the palm branches laying before him, the donkey carrying him—all these bring him joy. He is a King accepting the acclaim of his followers. Nevertheless, the rebuke of his opponents and the fate that will befall him and the City of David bring him to grief. He is the Lamb of God who will take away the sins of the world. It was a day unlike any other Jesus had ever lived, the day of his triumph and the day of his tears.

I think to fully appreciate the significance of this day we need to turn to Psalm 118, that processional hymn his disciples sang. Luke has the disciples singing, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven.” Perhaps the entire psalm ran through the mind of Jesus as he rode down the Kidron Valley into the east gate of Jerusalem. Psalm 118 is a word of thanksgiving for the Lord’s deliverance of the people. The people gather to give thanks, for God’s steadfast love that endures forever.

This favorite psalm of Martin Luther recounts the plight of the people, the hard battle with their enemies. The poet asks, “With the Lord on my side I do not fear, what can mortals do to me?” The poet insists that it is better to take refuge in the Lord than to put confidence in mere mortals. Now with enemies surrounding the people, the poet turns to God alone. The people cry out, “Save us, we beseech you, O Lord!” In Hebrew that’s “Hosanna”, the word for “save us.” And thankfully the people were delivered, rescued from their foes.

And so the poet sings, “The Lord is my strength and my might, the Lord has become my salvation.” The people join in “glad songs of victory” because they were not given over to death. The people come in joyous procession to give thanks to God in the temple.

As they approach the walls about the city, they cry to the gatekeeper of the Temple, “Open to me the gates of righteousness that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord.” Coming before the Lord, they celebrate their answered prayers for deliverance. And they marvel that “the stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.” And they

lift up their voices in praise: “This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it!”

Then in the Temple precincts, they are welcomed with these words, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord; we bless you from the house of the Lord.” In the temple itself the people approach the altar with these marvelous words, “Bind the festal procession with branches up to the horns of the altar.” Here we see the ancient custom of using palm branches in the temple worship service.

Finally, the people confess with great thanksgiving, “You are my God and I will give thanks to you, you are my God, I will extol you.” They give thanks to the Lord whose steadfast love endures forever.

It is always risky to speculate what exactly was going through the mind of Jesus. But allow me to speculate for a moment. As Jesus rode on in majesty to the City of David, the people welcomed him with a processional hymn. I can imagine that Jesus understand that momentous day entirely in terms of Psalm 118. It was for him a day of thanksgiving for God’s deliverance. A day of reminder that the stone the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. A day that the Lord has made, a day of the Lord in every sense of the word. A day for Jesus to take refuge in God alone, whose steadfast love endures forever.

As we enter Holy Week, perhaps it would enrich your spiritual life to immerse yourself in Psalm 118. This lovely psalm reminds us that God alone is the source of our hope and confidence. And just as Jesus faced the greatest crisis in his life with the words of this psalm in his heart and mind, we too are invited to face our challenges reminding ourselves that “this is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.” Whatever befalls us, we can with the psalmist look to God and sing, “O give thanks to the Lord, whose steadfast love endures forever.” May it be so. Amen.