

"Save Us!"

John 12:12-19

March 29, 2015

Palm Sunday

“Save us now!” That’s what the crowds were technically shouting by using the Hebrew word, *hosanna*, in the Palm Sunday parade as Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. However, some think the people were not literally asking to be saved, but that it was an excited utterance, much like when people cry out, “Lord, have mercy!” and are not literally asking the Lord for mercy. But let’s assume they really were asking to be saved. That leads us to ask several questions: saved from what? Saved how? And saved for what purpose?

Although Palm Sunday occurred near the beginning of a Jewish religious festival – Passover – it’s not likely that the people in Jerusalem were very spiritually minded when they shouted, “Save us now!” They had more practical, day to day concerns on their minds: an oppressive government, high taxes, insufficient wages, and a low standard of living. The people had heard Jesus talking about the Kingdom of heaven, as well as feeding, healing, and providing for people’s physical needs. The recent raising of Lazarus from the dead in nearby Bethany had pushed them over the edge. They thought this Jesus of Nazareth could very well be the promised Messiah who could save them politically, monetarily, and medically. It is no wonder that they were excited and shouting as they were. Jesus could potentially provide them with the salvation they desired.

I’m sure many people today (evens some within Christians churches) feel the same way. Many are concerned with oppressive government and high taxes. Many are suffering because of insufficient wages and a low standard of living. Many are afflicted with hunger, illness, and other human needs.

A popular complaint by those outside the church (and even some within the church) is that the Church is too concerned about “pie in the sky” issues. People have very real every day problems from which they need to be saved – lack of justice, lack of money, lack of health and

well-being – and so on. If Jesus appeared today as He did on the first Palm Sunday many years ago, there would be many people waving palm branches and shouting, "Hosanna!" in the same way and for the same reason as the Jerusalem pilgrims did back then.

There's only one problem (and it's a huge one) for this view of salvation. It's incomplete. It doesn't solve all our problems and it doesn't solve our most serious problems. These problems can be summed up in three words: death and beyond.

Death is our second most serious problem. It is universal and cannot be avoided. Not all will be oppressed. Not all will be poor. Not all will be sick. But all will die. That is because all have sinned against God and fallen short of His glory, earning the wage of death. Yet apart from this theological explanation, this is true whether one is religious or not. Even those who don't believe in God have to admit that death is the universal.

This leads to our most serious problem: that which lies beyond death. Is this life all there is? Is there life after death? And if there is life after death, of what does it consist?

The reaction to these universal and more serious problems is interesting. Many people try to ignore or, at least, not think about death, as if, by not thinking about it, death will not affect you. Death is always for someone else, but not for me. People do the same with what lies beyond death: they try to ignore it or not think about it. If they do think about what lies beyond death, it is always in a positive sense. People will say stuff like, "Mom has gone to be with Dad" or "Grandma is surely smiling down on us from above."

But what if death really will come to me and there is to be an accounting of my life – a Day of Judgment? That would make the importance of all those other problems about government, taxes, money, and health grow dim by comparison. Wouldn't death and judgment be a good reason to shout, "Hosanna! Save us now!" even louder and more desperately than the Palm Sunday pilgrims?

Those pilgrims knew that it would be a tall order for Jesus to deliver them from their problems. It would require great strength and resolve on Jesus' part. He had helped people in the

past on a smaller scale. To do what they needed Him to do would require work on a larger scale. Jesus could not fix the government. Jesus would have to do away with the Roman government and establish a whole new government with Himself as king. Jesus could not help a few people with a few problems here and there as He had done in the past. He would have to help all people with all problems. This would be a difficult, if not impossible, feat to perform, apart from a show of divine power.

Now, if that's true for saving people from those problems, just imagine what it would take to save people from the far more universal and far more serious problems of death and beyond. It would require Jesus to do away with sin, the cause of death. It would require Jesus to deal with judgment after death.

If the salvation which the Palm Sunday pilgrims were looking for cost a lot in terms of power, might, money, and man power, then you would think that any salvation dealing with death and what lies beyond would require even more power and might. But God operates much differently than people expect when it comes to saving people. The more difficult problems which affect all people in a worse way are dealt with by God, not with power and might, but in weakness and humility.

This is shown in how the Palm Sunday story begins. Mighty kings do not normally ride on donkeys, but humble kings do. Jesus did not ride in on a donkey because He likes donkeys or because there were no horses available. Jesus was fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah which tells how God would truly save His people: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." (Zechariah 9:9) The true Savior of Israel – and the world – would come in a humble way.

He would also save people in a humble way. Even though Jesus is God in human flesh, Jesus would not save us by a display of God's divine power, but through God's great mercy. He would not do away with sin, but takes the sin of the world – yours, mine, everybody's – upon

Himself. He would deal with sin, not by punishing it Himself, but by receiving God's punishment for all sin on Himself. He would not conquer death and what lies beyond with a glorious and victorious life now but by a humble and shameful death via a public execution. As our epistle reading said, "[Christ] was in the form of God, but did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by 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." (Philippians 2:6-8)

I'm sure that some people in that Palm Sunday crowd were disappointed in just five days when Jesus hung on a cross, dying. Jesus didn't save them in the way they thought He should save them and from what they thought He should save them. Many people today would be similarly disappointed or dissatisfied.

But Jesus saved us from more than they could have imagined. By taking on sin and its punishment, Jesus has saved us from sin's punishment. By undergoing death, Jesus has saved us from the curse of death. By being separated from His Father in Heaven, Jesus has saved us from ever being separated from Him in hell. By rising from the grave to life again, Jesus has saved us from the grave's power to hold us. Jesus did this all in exactly the right way: on the cross. There, on the cross, is the Kingdom of God, not in a rich and shiny palace in Jerusalem, Washington D.C., or anywhere else in this world.

Be careful not to repeat the mistake of those Palm Sunday pilgrims in looking for the wrong kingdom in the wrong way. Jesus came to save you from the worst possible oppression: the guilt of sin, the curse of death, and the horror of hell. If you have only the salvation which the Jews and many today long for - political, monetary, and medical salvation - without having the salvation Jesus came to bring, it ultimately means nothing. You would die politically free, rich, and healthy and go to hell eternally.

However, when you have the salvation Jesus came to bring, then you have everything. In the resurrection to eternal life, there will be no more oppression, no more poverty, no more disease, and no more death. You will be perfectly content and happy in all areas of life.

As mighty and magnificent as this all sounds, Jesus still brings His kingdom and establishes it in the hearts of people in weak and humble ways. Through simple water in Holy Baptism, He washes away sin, gives the Spirit, and establishes His rule. Through mere words in Absolution and Preaching, He gives forgiveness and peace. Through plain bread and wine, He gives us Himself – His very body and blood – for the remission of sin, life, and salvation. When you are looking for God’s Kingdom and His salvation, do not look for power and pizzazz. Look here in these places for that’s where you will find it.

My wife and I are very disappointed to miss out in being present for the birth of our new granddaughter and the celebration that occurred yesterday. What’s keeping us going is the knowledge that we will be there to celebrate with Andy, Kelsey, and Charlotte in a couple of weeks. Maybe you feel disappointed that you missed out in the Palm Sunday processional which we commemorated today. But keep on going and know that, by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, there is a palm processional and celebration waiting for you and me. St. John describes it in the book of Revelation:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Rev. 7:9-10)

And now, by what Jesus began on Palm Sunday and finished on Good Friday, it belongs to us! Amen