

“Hosanna!”

Matthew 21:9

December 1, 2013

1st Sunday in Advent

You’ve heard it said. You’ve probably said it. When a person sneezes, someone will say, “God bless you!” It sounds like a nice thing to say. Who wouldn’t want to be blessed by God? However, I think most, if not all, people don’t know *why* it is said after a sneeze or *what* it means. There are several explanations for this tradition. The first one I ever heard is still my favorite. People used to believe that a person was very vulnerable when sneezing. In that vulnerable state, a person’s body was open to invasion by the devil or evil spirits. Saying “God bless you!” was a way to protect a person from having that happen. It was a shield against evil.

In our Gospel reading for today, when crowds of Passover pilgrims welcomed Jesus in His coming to Jerusalem on the day we traditionally call “Palm Sunday”, they likewise used a phrase that sounded very good,, but it is unlikely they knew what it really meant or, if they did, how properly to use it. The word is our first Advent word: hosanna.

“Hosanna” is a Hebrew word and it means “save now!” However, for many Israelites at the time, the word was just a joyful interjection which didn’t mean anything. It’s kind of like the word, hallelujah, today. It literally means, “Let us praise Yahweh”. However, for most people it’s just an expression of relief or joy.

But let’s say the Israelites knew what the word, hosanna, meant and were using it in its literal sense. Suppose they were shouting, “Jesus, save us now!” What exactly were they asking to be saved from and how?

By addressing their plea to “the Son of David”, the people were acknowledging that Jesus was the Messiah who would come from the family of David. Therefore, they were asking to be saved from political oppression under Rome. They wanted the kingdom of Israel to be restored to what it was under King David.

What else did they want to be saved from? They likely wanted to be saved from poverty by being given wealth; saved from hunger by being given food; saved from disease by being given healings. These are all things people had seen Jesus do for some people in His three year ministry prior to this time. Now that He was coming to Jerusalem to set up His Messianic kingdom (so they thought) He could now do these things for everyone.

While they believed Jesus to be the Messiah, they didn't really know the full extent of who He was. When the crowds inside Jerusalem asked the crowds outside of Jerusalem who this was riding on a donkey, they replied, "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee." A prophet. That's all they saw him as.

In five short days, it all seemed to be gone. Their cries for saving seemingly went unheard. There was no Messianic kingdom, no perpetual food supply, no mass healing. There was only a dead Jesus hanging on a cross. Where was the saving they had been shouting for?

Before we come down too harshly on these people, realize that many today, both within the Church and outside the Church agree with those Palm Sunday pilgrims when it comes to their understanding of salvation. Many people, especially younger people, think that God's role in our relationship with Him is to make us happy. God should be there to heal us when we are sick, give us the material things we need to live, give us the toys we want to make us happy, and to keep us and our loved ones from ever dying. Unbelievers use suffering as a reason not to believe in God. Believers who don't have their needs and desires met use that as a reason to be upset with God. He has not saved them from want, need, or suffering.

Some Church bodies and some Christians believe that the job of the church should solely or primarily to fight against political injustice, feed the hungry, help the poor, care for the sick, and relieve human suffering. Jesus' birth on Christmas to peasant parents in poor circumstances under the cruel dictatorship of Rome only serves to make Jesus the poster boy for such a view of salvation.

If we think that "saving" means only relief from human suffering and the complete meeting of all physical desires, then we have ignored or seriously underestimated our greatest need and our

worst suffering from which we need saving. No one is saying that helping with human suffering is a bad thing or is something that Christians shouldn't be involved in. But we do have to recognize that saving people from human suffering or relieving human need is and can only be temporary.

This was true in Jesus' time. The euphoria of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem, which some saw as a political statement, was only short lived. Every person that Jesus ever fed got hungry again. Every person Jesus ever healed became sick again. Even every person Jesus raised from the dead died again.

The same is true in our time, as well. Any expectation that Jesus came to save us from need and give us all that we want will result only in disappointment. Some wants will go unmet. And those needs that are met will only be met temporarily. We will continue to suffer from want and need as long as we live here on this earth. Eventually, no matter how much we want to live, that is both a want that cannot be granted and a need that cannot be met. We will all die.

Does that mean Jesus did not come to save us, despite the crowds chant that day in Jerusalem? Some people think the crowds were wrong, not only in the details of Jesus' mission, but also in the very purpose of His mission as Savior. Or, does that mean Jesus tried to save us, but ultimately failed? Many people have said that, including some "Messiahs" who claim to have come to finish what Jesus started and failed.

But Jesus did come to save us and He succeeded in doing so. We have a greater problem here than simply hunger, poverty, suffering, or even death, as bad as all of those things are and that is sin. Sin is the origin of all human suffering and need. All of the things from which we think we need saving here on this earth are really only symptoms of sin. Sin causes them all.

But, even worse, sin causes physical death now. Sin causes eternal death in hell after physical death. The Bible says that every person who has ever lived, lives now, or ever will live has or will inherit this sinful condition. Observation shows that each one of us displays that sinful condition in our lives, not only in what we say and do, but also in what we think and feel since our minds and hearts are open to God's view.

We do what God has forbidden in His 10 Commandments in hurting and harming our neighbor, often because we are following the morality of the culture or using the feeble excuse that we had no choice or couldn't help ourselves. We fail to do all which God commands us to do in His 10 Commandments in loving and serving our neighbor because it seems too hard to do or we just don't want to do it. All of us are on the fast track to death and hell. All of us need saving from this.

Jesus came to save us precisely from this: the guilt of sin, the condemnation of death, and the punishment of hell. By coming the 1st time as a baby in Bethlehem, Jesus saved us from the condemnation of God's holy and righteous Law. Jesus perfectly obeyed the Law of God in our place. He did all the good which was required of us. He refrained from doing any of the evil which was forbidden to us. His perfect obedience has been transferred by God to our account. All of the sin and evil which was in our account has been transferred to Jesus' account.

Jesus took that sin and evil from us and went to the cross. The cross seems to interrupt our concept of cuteness and the celebration of joy at Christmas, as if it doesn't belong, but it should not. Despite all of our lovely decorations and charming nativity sets at Christmas, Jesus was not born to be lovely or cute. Jesus was born to die with the weight of the sin of the world on his shoulders. He endured God's wrath against sin. He paid the full price for sin in the divine system of justice.

When God looks at any of us, He sees no sin whatsoever. He sees only Jesus' holiness covering us like a garment. All of the sin is gone, having been paid for by Jesus' suffering and death. We *are* saved. Jesus saved us from what we needed saving from most: the finality of death and the eternity of hell. His resurrection from the dead shows that and guarantees that.

Yet Jesus is coming again. He came as a little baby at Christmas. He came as the suffering Savior into Jerusalem. He will come again as Mighty Judge and King on the last day. All the wrong will be destroyed by God's wrath. All the right will be restored by God's justice. This may seem to be a frightening experience, even to faithful Christians. We cry out, "Hosanna! Save us!" And He will. Because He has saved us from sin, death and hell when He came the first time to earth, we are assured that He will save us from His wrath and condemnation when He comes a second time to

earth. As the Scripture says, "Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. (Romans 5:9)

Although you may not have known the meaning of the word *hosanna* before today, you should have recognized it from our use of it in the communion liturgy. In fact, we practically repeat, word for word, what the Jerusalem pilgrims said on that first Palm Sunday. Later, we will sing, "Hosanna. Hosanna. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." We remember Jesus coming to us in the bread and wine to save us through His body given and His blood shed for us. In this meal, we also look forward to Jesus coming to save us once and for all. As we continue in our Advent journey this year, continue to cry out, "Hosanna, Son of David! Save us!" He has and He will. Amen.