

PALM SUNDAY, Apr. 14, 2019, Year C

- Last Sunday we followed Jesus up the hillside climb to the small village of Bethany. There, he enjoyed the gracious hospitality of Mary and Martha, and their brother, Lazarus, whom Jesus had recently raised from the dead. This location on the Mount of Olives was significant. *Based on certain biblical prophecies, some believers expected the Messiah would return from the East.¹ The Holy One would descend into Jerusalem from the area of Bethany, from near the Garden of Gethsemane.* These *aren't just trivial details* from Bible history, but instead are *deeply meaningful symbols*. Knowing more about them enriches our observance of this week. And so, we come to see how a relatively private and anonymous dinner up at Bethany, earlier in the week, providentially sets the stage for this day... and for the events that we commemorate in our liturgy.
- *First, Jesus humbly goes up to Bethany on the Mount of Olives. And then... with the same spirit he comes down into Jerusalem.* But *not that we would readily know this*. For the Gospels, with their descriptions of exuberant crowds praising Jesus during his palm-procession, create a *different* impression. *As do many artistic representations* of the event, like the beautiful one from James Tissot, which I offer to you this morning with your worship bulletin. Yet, we want to notice this: as Jesus enters Jerusalem, *he does not put himself forward into a royal role*, even though so many others want him to. *In the process, he does not involve himself in calculating reactions; he does not speculate about outcomes; he does not deal with probabilities.* Instead, *Jesus simply accepts God's holy Providence. And so, he walks or rides toward what has been planned for him*, rather than toward what he might have planned *for himself*.
- Today, with our Liturgy of the Palms reading, and then in our Passion reading, we attend to Jesus at Jerusalem in this, *the most holy time* of the Church year. *Despite whatever recognition Jesus may already have*

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received, *this is the decisive moment, for him ~ and for us.* In this Gospel moment, he realizes his true vocation.

- The most vivid –*and yet also very subtle*– sign of this is *how he embarks* on his procession toward what will be his ‘coronation.’ *The expected Messiah, coming as promised* from the East, and down from the Mount of Olives, *descends the slope riding upon a donkey.* That is, he rides upon a ‘beast of burden,’ and markedly *not* upon a ‘war-horse.’ *For the Prince of Peace returns to God’s holy Temple in humility rather than with the threat of aggression.*
- *Despite this, conflict and violence await the Prince of Peace.* At first, some of it seems to be *of his own making*, for he soon engages in the ‘*Cleansing of the Temple.*’ As we have noticed before, this act could easily be interpreted as *an act of violence*, and one that is *perpetrated by him.* Nevertheless, *just as he did in his descent into the Holy City on a donkey, he honors his vocation by being faithful to Providence.* And he acts as the One who will bring peace ~ but *the kind of peace* that the world does not give, *and cannot give.*
- Given all this, *a particular question should occur to us: We see the Prince of Peace enter the City mounted not on a warhorse but on a lowly donkey. So why, then, would his arrival provoke conflict and violence?* His immediate and dramatic act of overturning the tables of the money changers, and his scattering of sacrificial animals for sale in Temple, *were hardly enough* to instigate a plot to do away with him. Instead, it was surely *what that act appeared to represent.* Because it caused fears and distrust *to well up into* hostile action. For what we know *now, and what some at that time could intuit*, is a central truth ~ a truth as pertinent *to us* as it was *to those who ruled Jerusalem* in those troubled days. *There can only be one true King of Israel. There can only be one Lord.* And so, *all of us must choose.* Or, we

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must be responsible for avoiding the choice... the choice regarding *whom we recognize as King and Lord*. In Israelite history, there is *only one correct* answer to this question ~ *Adonai ~Y*hw*h*, the God of their history and ours.

- With many people in his day, the choice was made *by default*. Their present, so-called, 'king' was a pretender to the throne, set into place and maintained by the favor of the Romans. In some ways, *Herod was easy to accept*. After all, he ruled and commanded men, including those who wielded the power of arrest, detention, trial, and even execution. The household income of many people therefore *depended upon maintaining the present order*. *Power that we can see and feel often eclipses higher forms of authority*. And so, it impedes our ability to recognize *truth*. This is because *what is practical* can get in the way of *principle*. As a result, *being governed by principles* often conflicts with *choosing what seems practical* and sensible.
- *For the Sadducees and the scribes*, maintaining the practical and sensible present order was a relatively easy choice. They had much to gain from *letting things be just as they were*, whether that meant the running of the Temple or those things in the City that supported it ~ and depended on it. Yet, *for the Pharisees*, the choice was more complicated given their strenuous efforts *piously to adhere* to the Law. This was due to *their fidelity to the revealed higher order of things* ~ things that God had commanded, and which God expected them to obey. In this respect, *the Pharisees outlook and faith had a lot in common with Jesus*. The best example of this was their belief in resurrection, a belief that the Sadducees *did not share*. And yet, *Jesus' willingness to look toward the higher purpose of the Law*, and his inclination to put that higher purpose *ahead of human convention*, put him at odds with them. For when we make a distinction between *the Laws of God* and *the laws of men and women*, those people who are

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wedded to *human* rules *can feel threatened*, or at least *offended* when the contrast between *the two kinds of law* is observed.

- And so our liturgical commemoration today and throughout this week, of Jesus' Passion, brings with it *a need for clarity*. Our liturgy calls for our *explicit recognition of the choice that is always before us*. We can choose to remember, and be inspired to follow, the faithful vision of Joshua. For he challenged the people of his time with these stirring words: "*Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.*"²
- *Whom*, then, *do we serve*? And *whom* do we *choose* to serve?
- As we hear in the Passion readings, *the choice soon becomes stark*. For it is always easy to heap praise *upon a romantic figure* who is lauded *in a public way* ~ just as Jesus was upon his entrance into Jerusalem. *But what might it mean to remain faithful to someone accused of great crimes*, who is arrested, tortured and publicly humiliated? *What does it mean to remain faithful to one who is executed as a common criminal*, and who in the process is treated as the lowest of the low?
- What we commemorate today, and throughout this week, brings us face to face with these questions. May we embrace them, in all their awkwardness. *They are questions that will bring us life*. For As Jesus said, "*you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.*"³



James Tissot, *Procession on the Mount of Olives*

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The readings appointed for this day are:

- Luke 19:28-40 and Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29, *at the Liturgy of the Palms*
and for the Eucharist:
- Isaiah 50:4-9a
- Psalm 31:9-16
- Philippians 2:5-11
- [Luke 23:1–49](#) (the Passion Gospel, which is traditionally read in parts)

NOTES

¹ See, for example, Ezekiel 43:1-5; 46:12; and Zechariah 14:4. The theme of the departure from, and then the return of God's glory to the Temple is significant in Ezekiel. / See also the references to the morning and the rising sun (in the East) in Malachi 4 and Job 38:12 as well as Matthew 24:27, which may reflect a similar expectation.

² Joshua 24:15.

³ John 8:31-32.