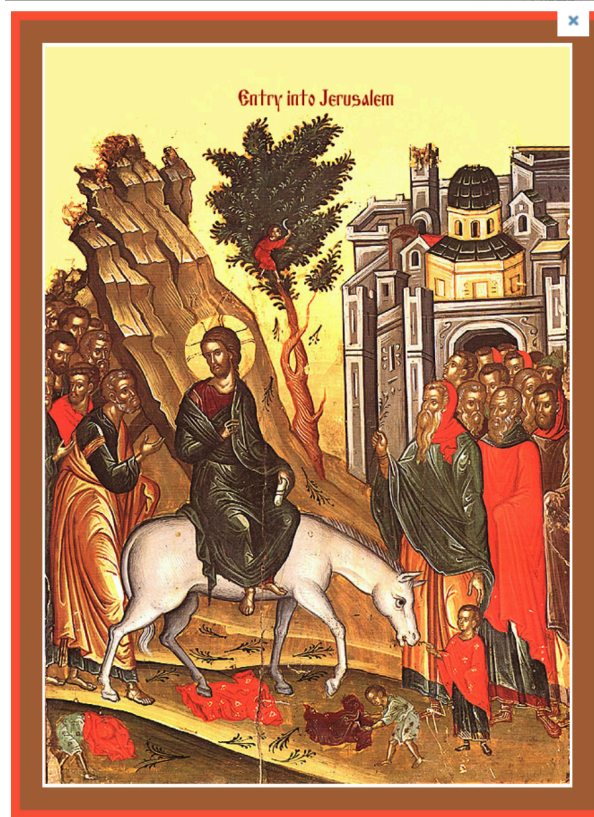


Notes from the Sermon on **Palm Sunday**, April 9, 2023:

The Jerusalem of the Heart



1) For over 400 years people have come to an area of western Texas, just above what is now the Mexican border, to cross between a particular mountain range. In English it is known as the “passageway to the North” and in Spanish it is called, “El Paso Del Norte” – we recognize it as the city of El Paso, Texas. The fate of immigrants and the process of immigration are very controversial topics, with many political overtones, yet all of us having come directly or through our relatives from another country understand something of the immigrants’ plight: wanting a better life or freedom for themselves and their loved ones. We are in many ways familiar with their stories and understand something of their songs.

2) Over the 40 days of Great Lent we have been reading each day a chapter from the Old Testament book of Exodus, which as a Greek word, means, “the way or path out.” It describes how God in hearing of the Israelites’ suffering and affliction under the Egyptians will “come down and deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians” and lead them out of captivity to freedom (Exodus 3:7-8). Each day during Holy Week one of the assigned readings in the lectionary of the Orthodox Church is a section from Exodus. In a passage we will hear on Holy Friday, Moses says to God: **“See, you have said to me, ‘Bring up this people’; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me....”** God replies, **“My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest”** (Exodus 33:12-14). In the final chapter of Exodus we hear how “at each stage

of their journey, as the people finally leave their position at Mt. Sinai, they will be led [by God] during the day by a cloud during the day and by fire at night.”

These stories of being freed from captivity and finding new life are part of the memory of the Jewish people each year as they celebrate Passover. They are essential as well for the Christian community in providing the stories and imagery for our own understanding of how God has “come down,” accompanied us with the “Presence” of Christ, and maintained this Presence through the Holy Spirit at “each stage” of our life journey. These stories and songs also offer us the necessary language for our own liturgical celebrations: in addition to the daily Holy Week readings we will hear the story of the Passover on Holy Saturday, sing the joyous hymn of the people as they have gone through the “Red Sea” (or the Sea of Reeds) with the refrain, “For Gloriously Has He Been Glorified,” and inaugurate our Paschal celebration with the words used by the people when - led by God - they finally broke camp at Mt. Sinai and moved with the ark of the covenant:

“Let God, arise, let your enemies be scattered,
and let your foes flee before you” (Numbers 10:35).

We will sing a slightly different version as presented in Psalm 68:

“Let God arise, let his enemies be scattered;
let those who hate him flee before him.”

3) We heard last Sunday how Jesus and his disciples were “going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was going before them” (Mark 10:32). Today we are present with them as Jesus enters the city and the people who feel that he is the expected Messiah respond by taking branches of palm trees and go out to meet him, shouting, the verse from Psalm 118:

“Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord” (John 12:13).

We have been considering to this point how certain people today and the Israelites of long ago have journeyed geographically from one place to another in order to be liberated and to find a better life for themselves and their families. All of us probably know something of this story.

The events of Jesus’s entrance into Jerusalem and the events of Holy Week require a certain consideration of geographic details as well. But the judgment that his presence enacted upon the people then and even now upon us remains active and demanding.

Perhaps this is why the above line from Psalm 118, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord,” is chanted so often during the Palm Sunday Services and is embedded several times within every Divine Liturgy, particularly at those moments when the presence of Jesus is affirmed: at the time of the Anaphora, before the consecration of the Bread and Wine, and just before the consecrated gifts of Holy Communion are distributed.

So, our response to His entrance into our life and that of our community continues to raise questions and challenges.

4) Moreover, our response to His presence has significance for us liturgically and as members of a community, but also in how we react in the most personal of ways. It can be helpful to imagine Jerusalem as not just a city within a certain country, but as a location within our hearts. There we can examine how we have recognized and affirmed the presence of Jesus in our lives or disregarded Him as not fulfilling our expectations. Perhaps in our own ways, we have even contributed to His crucifixion if not actively then at least by our indifference to Him or to those in whom He dwells.

The English poet, Malcolm Guite, summarized this way of looking at the location of “Palm Sunday” in a sonnet which he explained in this way:

“The inner journey is more necessary than ever, and in the following sonnet I have explored the truth that what was happening ‘out there’ and ‘back then’ as Christ entered Jerusalem is also happening ‘in here’ and ‘right now’. There is a Jerusalem of the heart. Our inner life also has its temple and palaces, its places of corruption, its gardens of rest, its seat of judgement.”

Palm Sunday

by Malcolm Guite

Now to the gate of my Jerusalem,
The seething holy city of my heart,
The saviour comes. But will I welcome him?
Oh crowds of easy feelings make a start;
They raise their hands, get caught up in the singing,
And think the battle won. Too soon they'll find
The challenge, the reversal he is bringing
Changes their tune. I know what lies behind
The surface flourish that so quickly fades;
Self-interest, and fearful guardedness,
The hardness of the heart, its barricades,
And at the core, the dreadful emptiness
Of a perverted temple. Jesus come
Break my resistance and make me your home.

5) **CONCLUSION:** The journey to discover the possibilities of real life and living sometimes require geographic travel through places and time, in the passage to or out of somewhere, but most often will lead to a place within where we can come to know and respond to the person of the crucified and risen Jesus in the most direct way.