PALM SUNDAY AND HOLY WEEK St John 12:1-18

Last Sunday in the reading from the Gospel we were told about the underhand way in which the sons of Zebedee, James and John, came to Jesus and asked him to grant that one of them would sit on his right and the other on his left hand in glory. The other disciples found out about the request and were naturally angry with them and very soon division broke out amongst the group. Jesus settled the dispute by calling the twelve to him and explaining the difference between earthly power and authority and that in the Kingdom of Heaven. He tells them that rulers among the Gentiles exercise authority over their subjects and their great ones tyrannise their peoples because they like to have power but in the Kingdom it does not work like this. Conversely, whoever wishes to be first or great among the disciples must substitute humility for power and be the servant of all. I remember Metropolitan Anthony telling us priests and a young bishop years ago that a bishop is not like the pinnacle of a triangle at the top but rather when the triangle is inverted he is at the bottom supporting and taking on the weight of what is above him - his flock. As we look forward to the coming coronation of King Charles we cannot fail to look back at the life of his mother, the late Queen Elizabeth, and admire her unflinching service and dedication to her subjects as perhaps the most striking aspect of her reign. When she was crowned in 1953 she went through a service which bore all the marks of a deacon’s ordination in the Church of England in which she vowed to become a servant to her people, which is the meaning of the Greek word.

So we begin to see that, although the disciples had been with the Lord throughout his earthly ministry, they had not really grasped his concept of kingship and greatness through service and suffering. We can recall their disappointment when they could not overpower the spirit in the dumb boy who has fits and, mystified, they ask their Master why they could not expel the demon like he did. Perhaps we can sympathise with James and John since they look at their master through the eyes of the Jewish historical and prophetic tradition of the Messiah which sees him as the great figure that will restore the earthly glory of Israel and exercise domination over the peoples of the world. And throughout the gospel accounts we notice the disciples’ incredulity and confusion when he tells them that he is going up to Jerusalem to be delivered to the chief priests and scribes who will humiliate him verbally and physically and condemn him to death, after which he will rise again. And perhaps the greatest argument breaks out when Peter refuses to accept Jesus foretelling his shameful end and the Lord is forced to liken Peter to Satan because he is setting his mind not on divine things but on human things.

With this in mind we come to today’s Feast where Jesus enters Jerusalem not like a Roman general in triumph after subduing an enemy of Rome but in the humble triumph of riding a donkey before the shouting crowds whom he has served through teaching and healing and even raising from the dead. Among these is his friend Lazarus, whose deliverance from death we celebrated yesterday. There are few visible triumphs in the life of the Lord. The real triumph is yet to come in his crucifixion, his victory over death and his resurrection on the third day. Today this visible triumph is in order as the Lord says when he is ordered by some Pharisees in the crowd to order his disciples to stop the celebration and the accolades of the crowds with ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord’. He answers them bluntly, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out”.

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We too join in this celebration in today’s feast before we move into the dark events of the coming week. Last week in answer to their request the Lord tells James and John that they will drink the cup which he has to drink and be baptised with the baptism with which he was baptised. In this he foretold what would happen to them both good and bad. Likewise for us this is the last day effectively on which we can celebrate the victory of Christ’s ministry on earth until we rejoice together in his victory over death through his glorious resurrection from the dead at Pascha.

In these coming days we can usefully examine ourselves or rather watch in the light of the disciples’ experience and misunderstanding of what the Kingdom which is not of this world involves. And hopefully we can see how far we have strayed from the measure which we should reach in our service to our Master and truly repent or turn for healing.

The disciples are told in the garden of Gethsemane to watch while Jesus goes away to pray and they fail even in this simple instruction. Each time he returns he finds them sleeping and this mirrors our experience in our relationship with our Master who sets the measure for members of the Kingdom by being faithful unto death.

This coming week, as we follow the services of the Church, journeying along the painful path of Christ’s impending death through sorrow, the agony of the Garden, the betrayal by one of his own, the baying for his blood by angry crowds, the mocking and humiliation of the Roman soldiers, the scourging and finally the crucifixion, we need to remember the victories of this weekend. The resurrection after four days dead of his friend Lazarus and the joyous reception with palms as he enters Jerusalem. These are visible and tangible victories but most important is Christ’s coming resurrection prefigured yesterday in that of Lazarus and the statement to Martha, which directly concerns us, “I am the Resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die”.

Glory be to God. Happy Feast!

*Oxford 9th April 2023.*