

King of Contrasts

In the name of our coming King, dear friends in Christ: This morning's Gospel is the Apostle John's account of the triumphant entry of our Lord Jesus into Jerusalem on the Sunday of his last week. All four of the Gospel writers describe this momentous event; but what struck me with John's telling of it are the many ironic contrasts that appear throughout the story. And there's a lot going on here, but with the exception of Jesus, none of the participants understand what. Consider:

We've got Jesus at the apex of his ministry. His approval numbers with the general populace are off the charts. He has just a couple days before raised to life a man who had been dead four days. He has thus proven beyond any doubt that he is the Lord of life. People kept demanding of him a sign. Well, there it is. With this and his other mighty works together with his message of forgiveness for sinners, he's demonstrated that he is the long-promised Messiah all Israel has been waiting for. He's the heir to the throne of David, the fulfillment of the religious hopes and dreams of God's people. And yet the people who are most outwardly religious, the priests, scribes, teachers of the Law, and the Pharisees all reject him. It's the far more secular and less religiously trained masses that welcome him.

And consider who Jesus really is: not just the King of Israel, but the Creator and King of the whole universe. This is the day of his supposed triumph, his grand entry into the city that's been waiting for him from its foundation. And what does he get for a welcome? A pathetic little parade featuring him on a borrowed donkey. The crowd waves palm branches because Jesus has no proper flags or banners. And they shout "Hosanna – Save us, now!" but they have no idea what it is he's come to save them from. He's here to redeem the world from sin and death – the most important and profoundly religious mission in the history of the world – and yet his coming is seen by both the crowd and the religious leaders as a purely political event.

Even his disciples see it that way. These are the men who have been closest to Jesus. They've been his students for three years. He's told them repeatedly what this is all about. And they don't get it. Here they are fulfilling ancient prophecies and witnessing the unfolding of God's eternal plan of salvation, and they are as clueless as everyone else. It's only afterward that they'll look back upon this day and understand these things were written about him by the prophets and that they had a hand in completing them.

The one of these prophecies that John quotes from Zechariah is worth noting because it begins with the words "Fear not!" The idea is that our mighty King is here; we're saved! We ought to be encouraged. But this is exactly the problem. They aren't. As I pointed out in last week's message, the coming of Jesus has made the city (especially its leaders) very much afraid. It's out of fear that they have decided to find a way to kill Jesus.

And then John takes us to some Pharisees who are sitting on the sidelines watching. They seethe with rage and wear scowls on their long faces. This display of devotion to Jesus disgusts them. But look at what they say to each other. First it's, "You see that you are gaining nothing." And this is rich. It works on several levels. Initially, it's absolutely true and they don't know it. What I mean is that their whole system of theology is about works righteousness. They have rules for everything which they follow fanatically thinking that by doing so they are earning salvation for themselves. The reality is that they are gaining nothing. It's a satanic lie that any

sinful human can earn salvation by the works of the Law. And the truth is that their false belief prevents them from seeing the genuine path to salvation through repentance and faith in Jesus.

But now take it a step farther: they've been preaching against Jesus and doing everything they can to discredit him in the eyes of the crowd. That hasn't been working, which is their point. "We're not gaining anything." And this, in turn, is what leads them to take more drastic action against Jesus. Now they want to kill him – and they will. But that too will gain them nothing because Jesus won't stay dead. He'll be back a million times more popular than before. Thus their effort to destroy the Christian movement will fulfill it. So, they'll accomplish something in the end; but it will be exactly what they don't want.

And then they say, "The whole world has gone after him." It's an obvious overstatement. True, a large part of the city's population has turned out to welcome Jesus, but he has plenty of detractors (like them); and c'mon, Jerusalem is hardly the whole world. In that day it wouldn't have shown up on a list of the world's fifty most populous cities. But these Pharisees are resentful. They crave the esteem and adoration of the crowd. They like everyone looking up to them as the holiest and most righteous people around. They can't stand that Jesus, their enemy, is getting all the attention. And again, this is part of their motivation to destroy him. Which they'll do – and that will precipitate the chain of events by which the whole world will follow after him: first as the Christian Gospel spreads to every nation on earth and people of each race and language come into God's Kingdom, and ultimately when Christ returns in glory and every knee bends to him. The words of these embittered Pharisees though laughable at the moment, will turn out to be far truer than they ever imagined.

And then as if on cue representing "all the world", some Greeks show up on the scene. We're told that they are among those who came up to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. It means that they are either Greek proselytes, that is, converts to the Jewish faith, or that they are observers seeking to understand the Jews and their religion. It was said of the Greeks that their pursuit was wisdom. They were infinitely curious, always seeking to know some new thing. So it might be that they are here to check things out. But whatever their status, upon arrival at Jerusalem, they cannot have avoided hearing stories about Jesus. He's the talk of the town. And so it makes sense that they would want to see him and have an opportunity to hear what he has to say. So this is kind of nice: Greeks who seek wisdom desire an audience with the One who is God's own Wisdom from on high, while those who have this Wisdom in the form of the Sacred Scripture reject him.

But their problem is one of Jewish propriety. Jews and Gentiles don't mix. And here especially at Passover, no Jew is going to go hang out with a bunch of Gentiles and risk becoming ceremonially defiled. That would preclude them from participating in the Feast. Furthermore, we know that during his last week, Jesus did most of his teaching in the Temple in courts where no Gentile could go. This is likely why we see them approaching Philip with their request to meet with Jesus. Apparently Philip doesn't know what to do with it, which is why he goes to consult with Andrew. St. John doesn't give us the details, but we can imagine how this request would have startled and confused them. They believed that Jesus was to be the King of the Jews; but will he deal with Gentiles? They know that he has in the past. There was that Roman centurion, the Samaritan woman at the well, and a few others; but the truth is that every time Jesus has had direct dealings with non-Jews it really creeped them out. To them it wasn't right. Just the same, to their credit they don't squelch the request. They take it to Jesus and let him decide.

I'm certain that they were expecting a simple yes or no from Jesus (and probably hoping for no). But as we heard, that's not what they got. Instead, Jesus takes it in another direction entirely. He says, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified" and proceeds to speak not of his resurrection or his triumphant return in judgment, but of his soon to be accomplished passion and death. *This*, to Jesus, will be his most glorious moment.

And this is by far the sharpest contrast we see in the text. The disciples think of Jesus being hailed by the citizens of Jerusalem as his most glorious moment to date. The Pharisees think so too, and they envy him for it. And they both have this in common: they crave the adoration of the world. They want to be first. They want to be on top of the world enjoying power, esteem, fame, and wealth. For Jesus it's exactly the opposite. He's come to serve, not to be served. He will be glorified not when the crowd hails him, but when they curse and revile him. His glory is not in the honors they heap upon him, but in accepting their shame and disgrace – the guilt of the world's sins heaped upon him. Then he'll be lifted up not on a throne, but on a cross. Then he'll be robed not in majestic clothes and jewels, but stripped naked and covered with bloody wounds and bruises. Then he'll be crowned not with a royal diadem, but with a crown of jabbing thorns. Then as on this day they will hail him, King of the Jews – and though they won't mean it (to them it will be a mocking joke), they'll be exactly right. That will be the moment of Jesus' true triumph and glory.

But what is it about the request of these Greeks to see Jesus that causes him to spin off on this apparent tangent that on the surface, at least, seems to have nothing to do with what they asked? It has to do with something he says later in this same discourse. It comes a bit after where our text left off. But he says this: "I, when I am lifted up, will draw all men to myself." Jesus understands the coming of these Greeks and their request to know him as the beginning – the first couple drops of a tidal wave of humanity. It assures him that it's true, that all men are being drawn to him – not so much in faith, not yet – but that the Father is placing upon Jesus the collective guilt of the entire world, the sins of all humanity. Thus his death will be the source of life for countless others. It's the ultimate act of love and sacrificial service.

And that's why he continues by saying, "Unless a seed falls into the earth and dies it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." It's a picturesque way of describing how the death of one may give life to many. He means his own death, of course; but then he turns it on us. Those who follow Jesus will be like him. They'll go where he leads them. Where's that? The same place he goes: to the cross. As he gives his life that we may live, so those who follow Jesus will die to self and worldly ambitions, crucifying in themselves the old sinful nature, and seek to serve others with their lives, and, if necessary, their deaths. It's not the way of the world. It stands in direct opposition. But it is the way of God's Kingdom and our King of Contrasts.

Therefore let us make it a point to follow Jesus and to be always where he is. To glorify us he must take us to where he himself was glorified: the cross. He does this in Baptism, in which we are united with his death for our sin; he does it in Baptism's renewal in daily in confession and absolution; he does it in his proclaimed Gospel, in which the story of his saving work for us is made known; and he does it in Holy Communion, in which we eat of the life-giving fruit of the cross: his own body and blood. As Jesus said, "Where I am, there will my servant be also." And there where the Father glorified Jesus, he will also honor us for Jesus' sake. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!