

Things Are Not As They Appear

In the name of him who comes to us righteous and having salvation, dear friends in Christ: Today the Christian Church throughout the world celebrates our Lord's triumphant entry into Jerusalem amid waving palm branches and the accolades of the crowd. It's the official kick off of what call Holy Week: the week that begins on this jubilant high note and ends in utter sorrow with the Lord Jesus crucified, dead, and buried. To be sure, it is largely because the crowd proclaims Jesus the Son of David and the Messianic King that the Jewish religious leaders panic and accelerate their plans to destroy him. In that sense, the events of Palm Sunday that we celebrate today are the beginning of the end for Jesus and his earthly ministry.

And Jesus knew it. As we heard in today's Old Testament lesson, the Savior's Palm Sunday parade had been described some five hundred years earlier by the prophet Zechariah. Jesus was well aware that the crowd's shouts of praise at his coming were in response to the prophet's call for the daughter of Zion to rejoice greatly.

But that's quite a delay: five hundred years between the prophecy and its final fulfillment. It raises several questions. Who was this Zechariah? And who were his original hearers – the ones to whom he spoke these words in his day? Why did the Lord give *these* words to them? What was going on in their lives that the Lord had the prophet call upon them to rejoice in view of the King's coming? These are the questions I'd like to explore this morning because the answers have application to us in our day.

We begin with Zechariah. He was, together with Haggai and Malachi, among the post-exilic prophets. That is, he was called by God to serve the Judeans who returned from the Babylonian captivity toward the end of the sixth century BC. Recall that because of Judah's unfaithfulness and idolatry and the people's stubborn refusal to repent despite the pleading of the prophets, the Lord caused the nation of Judah to be wiped out. He removed his presence from his holy Temple and withdrew his hand of protection from over his people. Then the Babylonians came in force. They ravaged the countryside and laid siege to Jerusalem, ultimately reducing it to smoldering a pile of rubble. All the inhabitants – those who hadn't starved to death during the siege – were either slaughtered or enslaved. The devastation was total.

But in the years leading up to that disaster, before the hammer fell, the Lord had already preserved a remnant of his people: some fifty thousand Judeans who had been carried off as hostages and resettled in penal colonies in distant Babylon. Life for these people was miserable. They felt they had been cut off and forgotten by the Lord. But through prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and others, the Lord proclaimed that he hadn't forgotten them at all, and that one day he would allow them to return to Judah and rebuild their nation. To those in exile, this seemed an impossible dream. Few of them believed it.

And then one day it happened. Practically overnight the Empire of Babylon fell to the Persians. And one of the first decrees of the new emperor was that all the peoples who had been displaced or relocated by the former regime were free to return to their homelands. The Judeans in exile were both astonished and overjoyed at these developments. The Lord said to them, "See? I told you I hadn't forgotten you. I always keep my Word. You can trust me." One

of these exiles was appropriately named Zechariah, which means, “The Lord Remembers”. Indeed he does.

The initial joy experienced by the returning exiles was soon dampened. The old timers, those who’d lived in Judah before the captivity, would have remembered the place like it was when they left before its destruction: the countryside green and cultivated, shady trees, neat gardens, orchards and vineyards carefully maintained. And Jerusalem itself, the city of God: high walls, noble towers, full of homes and businesses and markets. And most desirable of all, Solomon’s massive Temple standing above it all, with its white marble façade, the gold crowns on its pillars – a building that looked fit to be the Lord God’s dwelling place on earth. An amazing sight to behold. Those who hadn’t seen these things, who were born in the exile, would have grown up with the stories of it all – stories that tend to get embellished over time as stories do. You can well imagine their high expectations.

They arrive in Judah and what do they find? The countryside wasted, the ancient trees having been cut down by the enemy to make their siege engines so many years before; the vineyards and orchards long left unattended, overgrown, diseased, infested with insects; wild animals the only inhabitants of the land. And Jerusalem, that once glorious city, now ruins left derelict for many decades, picked clean of any valuable materials, and overgrown with brush and brambles. This isn’t how we thought it was going to be. It’s going to be a lot harder than we thought.

They roll up their sleeves and go to work. But it’s slow going. The returnees are few in number; only a small fraction of the population that used to live here. They’re poor. They were essentially prisoners in Babylon. They haven’t got money or tools or draft animals. They lack technical skills. They were used as slave labor and field hands. They don’t know how to construct a city and a nation. Even after they’ve been at it for several years they’ve hardly made a dent in the work that needs to be done.

And of course one of their first priorities was to rebuild the Temple of the Lord. This was necessary so that they could worship him properly – and even more importantly, offer the sacrifices by which their sins were forgiven. It was turning from the Lord and refusing to repent that caused all this to happen in the first place. They wanted to make sure they didn’t let it happen again.

But like I said, they were poor refugees. Solomon’s Temple had been built in Israel’s heyday. They were rich back then. The wealth of the nations was pouring in, and millions contributed generously to the Temple and its fine appointments. The best craftsmen were hired to do the work. They used the highest quality materials. But now, when the returnees laid out the foundation for the new Temple, those who remembered seeing the former broke down and wept. They could see already that what they were building was going to be a pathetic shack compared to the Temple they’d known. Everyone was profoundly disappointed.

Work on this Temple continued in fits and starts over the next ten years or so. But it too was slow going. There was so much other work that needed to be done, so many other distractions: clearing fields, removing rubble, building homes, getting some semblance of an economy going again. There was little time and even less money to spend on a Temple. Eventually the work ground to a halt. They pretty much gave up.

And there were other problems. The people of the areas around Judah resented these returned exiles. They made a lot of trouble for them. And they complained to the King of Persia

about them, making all kinds of false accusations. That resulted in threats, and formal inquiries, and legal hassles, and other vital projects being delayed. At length it all became too much for the returnees. They became thoroughly discouraged. They lost heart. They had had a vision in their minds of returning their land, its capital, and above all the Temple to their former glory; but reality was something else altogether. This is *not* how we thought it was going to be.

It was to these dispirited and downcast people that the Lord had the prophet Zechariah speak the words we heard in today's Old Testament text. They are words of hope and encouragement. "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud O daughter of Jerusalem!" Why? "Behold your King is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he."

That is to say, things are not as they appear. You look around and see things to be disappointed about. That's not the way the Lord sees it. It is to this city currently under construction and to this Temple that you are building now that the Lord will send the Messiah. Yes, the former things looked better; but due to your sin and pride and idolatry they were destroyed. It is to these things of humbler appearance – and hopefully to a humbler people – that the Lord will send the Savior. So lift your sagging spirits. Rejoice! The King is coming. Make ready his way. God's plan of salvation is proceeding exactly according to his schedule.

Through Zechariah the Lord goes on to describe this Messianic King. He too appears in humility. He's not mounted on a majestic war steed like you'd expect; he doesn't come at the head of a mighty army wearing shining armor; but instead he comes alone riding a humble donkey. You'd look and think, "How's this guy going to do anything worthwhile for us? How can he save us from our enemies?" But things are not as they appear. His victory will be complete. "He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; the battle bow shall be cut off." It's the prophet's way of saying that all Israel will be reunited under this King's reign and they'll be freed from enemy oppression.

And not only Israel will be included in his reign; his kingdom extends far beyond that. "He will speak peace to the nations; his rule shall be from sea to sea, and ... to the ends of the earth." And note that words are his only weapons. That's all he needs. And with them he brings peace to people all over the globe.

What the prophet foresees is the Messianic reign of Jesus that began when Christ our Lord entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and was hailed as King and that continues in our day. What the prophet foretells is how the word of the Gospel, the message of Christ crucified for sinners and raised for our justification, sets captives free from the slavery of sin; and how the blood of his covenant – the blood he shed for us on the cross – is even now freeing the prisoners of Satan from the waterless pit of despair.

If you had been there that first Palm Sunday, you would not have seen much: just a Galilean rabbi being feted by a small crowd of Jerusalem's lower classes. But things were not as they appeared. There was a lot more going on. If you had been there on Good Friday, you would have seen Jesus battered and bloody, hanging on a cross. All appearances would have told you that he lost; that his ignoble death was the end. But things were not as they appeared. In his death he won the victory for us.

And the same is true for us in our day. It strikes me that quite often we can be like the returned exiles at the time of Zechariah. We have in mind a picture of a glorious past – somewhat embellished perhaps: a supposed golden age when Christianity was more acceptable to our culture and things in the Church were so much better than now. People were

more active, they volunteered more, they were more regular in attendance, they gave more generously, they were more biblically literate and more interested in heavenly things. But now we look at the world around us and see things that alarm us. The culture is increasingly hostile to us and to our faith. And we look at our congregations and see only things to be disappointed about: fewer people, less interest, less faithfulness, declining membership, people getting burned out – doing lots of work but without much to show for it. It's pretty depressing. It's tempting to become discouraged.

But things are not as they appear. As long as Christ's Gospel of peace is being proclaimed among us, as long as his words of forgiveness are being heard by penitent sinners, as long as we baptize in his name, as long as we receive the blood of his covenant in Holy Communion, and as long as we remain faithful to his Word, then the King is coming to us righteous and having salvation. Christ is doing his work of setting prisoners free from sin and incorporating them into his everlasting kingdom. And that, my friends is reason to rejoice, regardless of what we see. So let's not focus on how things look. But let's keep our eyes on what Jesus our King is here doing among us and rejoice in his salvation. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!