

John 12:20-33
March 21, 2021

Grace and peace be with you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the gospel reading we have for today, Jesus has just entered Jerusalem for the last time during the build up to the Passover feast. He enters the city walls with all of the fanfare of palms flying and Hosannas being shouted, and he is seated on a donkey as a sign of being the king as told by the prophet in Zechariah 9.9.

At this point Jesus is like a superstar – like Elvis in the 50s, the Beatles in the 60s, Michael Jackson in the 80s, or the Korean pop group BTS today. Everyone is clamoring to see him. Shouting, singing, and perhaps even passing out. People just had to get look at this miracle maker for themselves! Maybe he had some miracles to throw their way.

This is the kind of entrance that the emperor would expect in Rome, but here it is Jesus who is receiving it in Jerusalem, although his parade is much less extravagant. It's just Jesus on a donkey with palm fronds. No spoils of war. No warriors. No trumpets. Just Jesus by himself. All alone he is the conquering hero.

But it's not all fun and games. There is some definite darkness in the background.

So, what was it that made Jesus so popular and adored, but at the same time extremely hated? According to John, it is because of the resurrection of Lazarus back to life. As soon as Lazarus is resurrected, the temple authorities plan to kill Lazarus and Jesus along with him.

Why? Why would they be afraid of these miracles from God? They were the religious leaders who should be looking for signs from God, but they were afraid. Not of God, but of Rome.

The Pharisees and chief priests were afraid that the signs Jesus was doing would be seen as a threat to Rome's rule and that Rome would then come to destroy their temple and their nation. If everyone believed Jesus was the true king, the Messiah, then Rome would be on the attack, and we know that Rome was extremely powerful with weapons, technology, and soldiers, and they had no qualms of using force to keep their peace, the Pax Romana.

The cross is the prime example of keeping the Pax Romana. By constantly threatening the occupied and oppressed people with a public, humiliating, and

excruciatingly painful death, they were discouraging people from even thinking about revolt.

And by keeping the religious authorities under their thumb by threats of destroying the temple, the Pharisees and chief priests also helped keep the Pax Romana, which is not a real peace at all. It's just basic fear tactics and bullying.

Jesus was a direct threat to Rome and the religious leaders were afraid. They were more afraid of Rome than they believed that God could be working in their midst. Fear is the greatest obstacle to God's work. It is the darkness.

And here comes Jesus. He gives people hope, and hope can lead to a revolution. Because of that, he must be destroyed. Hope destroys the status quo.

In John 11: 48 they say – If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation. In verse 50, Caiaphas, the high priest then says – You know nothing at all. You do not understand that it is better to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.

Caiaphas had previously prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation, but not just the nation, but in order to gather all of the dispersed children of God, which brings us to verse 12:32 from today's reading where Jesus says that when he is lifted up from the earth, on the cross, he will draw all people to himself.

Jesus sees a bigger picture. It's not just about the status quo of Israel at the time, but his crucifixion and resurrection are for everyone. It goes beyond Israel.

And so when the Greeks show up at the back door and ask to get in to see the superstar, Jesus basically ignores them, because they don't understand what is happening. At that time no one did.

It's not about the signs, they were just signs of something that was yet to come. Jesus' real work is to judge the world and the rulers of the world as being inadequate.

The Pax Romana is not real peace. Only real peace can be known through Jesus' death and resurrection. Real peace only comes from knowing that the rulers of the world are insignificant to God's rule. God is stronger than them all. Jesus is the true king – a king that brings peace and hope to all people. God does not rule with fear, because fear is judged to be deadly and God is all about life.

God rules by giving life. Life – life to Lazarus, life to Israel, life to the Greeks, and life to us as well. God is all about life – that is the light and the hope and the peace of all people.

And so after his crucifixion, Jesus falls to the earth and dies, and in his death he brings much fruit, because he brings all people into God's kingdom where love rules, and love multiplies, because every act of love is at least doubled.

And so, anytime we see death and bring life to the situation, we are going where Jesus already is. Jesus is always in the midst of death so that life can be brought into it.

So when someone is troubled, we bring them hope. When someone is discouraged, we bring them encouragement. When someone is hungry, we feed them. When someone is lonely, we sit with them. When someone is being discriminated against, we stand with them. And as someone is dying, we bring them the good news of the resurrection.

As disciples, we go where our Savior is, and in so doing we bring all people into Jesus' wide open embrace. On the cross, his arms are open to everyone. And that's the whole reason he came, to gather everyone back into God's kingdom. To return to the promise made to Abraham so many years ago. A promise that all people would be blessed by God.

So, Jesus comes and glorifies God's name. He sets the record straight. This is who God is. God is death and resurrection, and that's how the Greeks and everyone else will truly see who Jesus is, who God is. Jesus is not just some pop star. He is God's love personified for all of creation. God rules by love.

The second commandment is do not use God's name in vain. When we speak life, hope, peace, and love, we keep that commandment and God's name is glorified in us.

As John the Evangelist said, as recorded in 1 John 4:18 - There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.

Jesus alone is our source of eternal salvation, and because of that we never have anything to fear.

As we approach the end of Lent, we are reminded that God is stronger than empire, hate, fear, and death. That is what Jesus came to prove to us and assure us of for all of eternity.

So, rejoice greatly! Shout aloud! Lo, our king comes to us; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey. He will cut off all means of war. He will command peace to all the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, from the great River to the ends of the earth.

In his death and resurrection, Jesus the Christ has drawn all people to himself. May we continue to share his good news until every person knows no fear of any kind.

Christ is our king.

Thanks be to God. Amen.