

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Palm Sunday
March 25, 2018

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The raising of Lazarus was last week's gospel at Mass. It is placed there because it triggered the events of Holy Week. This stupendous event left some people quite beside themselves with admiration. Others were deliberately hostile, and still other just plain skeptical. But the raising of Lazarus had everyone's attention. The Name of Jesus was on everybody's lips.

It is easy to believe many people walked the two miles from Jerusalem to Bethany to look for the man who had emerged from the tomb. People traveling along that road were caught up in the wonder of it all. They were like the people who queue up at 2am to wait for tickets to the concert of some rock-music star. They talked to each other as they journeyed. The excitement was contagious. What about Jesus, they asked. Where is He now? What would He do next? Would He come to Jerusalem for Passover?

Our Lord did come. But He was the only person not caught up in all the hype. We do not have to try to sort out what Christ knew and when He knew it. But at least since the Transfiguration, Jesus knew He was "The Man of Sorrows acquainted with grief." Christ came from Heaven to sin-sick humanity. The decision to enter Jerusalem was not determined by a sudden spike in the approval ratings! The Cross! As grisly and horrible as it was, the Cross would be the perfect and final test and revelation of Perfect Love. It was the strong current of the Father's will and the opportunity of the Cross that led Jesus into the Holy City.

That is why many people understand the Palm Sunday procession as a *deliberate*, *premeditated*, and *provocative* challenge to the Jewish authorities. Even the crowds who admired Jesus knew there was danger for Him in the city. The Son of God knew how to enter a place quietly and unannounced. He had done that at Christmas, of course. And St John tells us Jesus had gone to Jerusalem secretly for a previous festival. But the Lord was not going to enter Jerusalem inconspicuously this time. Palm Sunday is the only time we know Jesus *rode* into the city rather than walked. The Lord made His entrance as *public* as possible so that His challenge could not be ignored.

The immense popularity of Jesus reached new heights with the raising of Lazarus.

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So the Temple authorities may have wanted to bide their time and leave Jesus alone. But the Lord would not let them leave Him alone! The Palm Sunday procession forced them to act. Indecision was no option.

And that is the way of Christ with us. He challenges us in a manner that compels us to accept Him. *Or*, we join those who crucified Him. So often when some evil is unfolding, we hope that by compromise or temporizing the worst-case scenario can be avoided. (Munich in 1938 used to be the great example. My father remembered listening to the short-wave radio broadcast and concluding appeasement would not work.) We try to do damage control. We try to mitigate things. But God does not permit this. The moment comes when the rubber hits the road. St John reminds us in more Biblical language. “For judgment came Christ into this world.”

When we least expect Christ, and when it is least convenient for us to receive Him He comes to us in some confrontation like the Palm Sunday procession. How many times do we say, “Why today, Lord, when I don’t much feel like acting on my Christian convictions?” And He leaves us only the choice of giving up our selfishness and accepting Him, or crucifying Him.

Christ does not just make an appeal to our wills. Our will power is not the deciding factor. Often the appeal to our wills can increase our self-righteousness or our despair at our inability to change. Rather, what is set before us is the Cross, and the irresistible goodness and beauty of Jesus Christ. That is what wins allegiance of human hearts. It is grace which perfects nature. “Our wills were designed to cooperate with divine grace. “Do the right thing” is a half-truth. “Do the right thing” means “cooperate with Divine grace.”

Think of those assistants at the Passion: Simon of Cyrene, Dismas, the Centurion, Joseph of Arimathea, and Nicodemus. On Good Friday the setting was all wrong for the exercise of will power! They accepted Christ not by the strength of their wills but by *some strength that entered their wills*. It is the universal experience of Christians that self-love is transfigured by perfect love.

That experience is best described by St Paul. “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I but Christ liveth in me; and the life which I now live

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in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, Who loved me, and gave Himself for me.”

His giving Himself is what we commemorate in Holy Week.