

"Following Christ" Matthew 21:1-9 Ad Te Lavavi 2023

They are nearly gone. The leaves, that is. Rich in the green of spring, they are even more stunning in autumn: gold, auburn, red as if on fire. Then follows the falling leaves and the blowing wind. Finally, only the muted-brown pallor of death remains. This death is followed by cold, biting wind, and the shadow of winter. Yet, it is bearable because we know the Spring, and with its new life, will return.

It's not so with other deaths. Hold the hand of one dying in a hospital. Visit a loved one in a nursing home, whose mind has left, but whose body still shuffles along. Finally, the grave can no longer be denied. Then, it is much harder to believe in the springtime of life.

The Nicene Creed teaches us to speak of the springtime of life, the body's resurrection. Although, sometimes, we only want to remember what was. That must have been the disciples' attitude five days after today's Gospel reading.

The multitudes shouted their approval and chanted their praise: "Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord!" But then the singing turned to taunting. The beauty of the procession became the ashes of death. The praises became criminal charges and palm branches are exchanged for thorns. They forget the royal welcome and the crowd clamored for an execution. Mother Mary wept her tears and a stranger's tomb claims the body. Locked doors replaced the welcome's embrace. Their bright hope darkened into a deep despair.

Such is this world's cursed life. The world says, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may die." But God teaches us something different in the season of Advent. It is a season of repentance, but not in the same way as Lent. The repentance, the turning away from our sins, is in many ways for our own false hopes and expectations, even our inability to wait.

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We cannot wait for decorations, for presents, and for parties. Neither do we want to wait for any other pleasures. When we honestly look within, we find our hopes have often been in the possessions and expectations of this world, not in our Savior King.

Yet, the ways of the world inevitably fail us. The world leaves us with a lingering, dull, hollow ache. Yet, our hearts still long for something, something the world cannot fill! What was, what cannot be, and what could have been, will never be.

Where then can we turn when our possessions do not satisfy, our politicians fail us, our presents get old, and passions wither into pain? Where can we turn? We can turn only to the God of our salvation.

Advent is about waiting, not for presents and worldly trinkets, but waiting for Him. You wait for the King, coming to you. "Tell the daughter of Zion, 'Behold, your King is coming to you, lowly, and sitting on a donkey.'" And why is the king doing this? St. Matthew explains: "This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet."

What prophet? The Evangelist Matthew assumes we'll know that it's Zechariah. Going to Zechariah, we find that Matthew has left out a couple of key words. The full quote: "Rejoice heartily, daughter of Zion; cry out, daughter of Jerusalem! Look! Your king is coming to you. He is righteous and having salvation" (Zechariah 9:9).

Why would Matthew leave out those words, "He is righteous and having salvation"? Perhaps, it's because the first readers of Matthew's Gospel could have gotten the wrong idea. Many in Matthew's day looked for a king, but a king of their own making. They wanted someone who would bring social justice, someone who would bring political salvation.

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That understanding explains why the people proclaimed Jesus as king with palm branches. Palm branches were the symbol of an independent Israel, free from the yoke of foreign domination, before the Romans came to conquer. It's all described in the books of 1st and 2nd Maccabees.

Yet, Jesus is righteous. He is bringing salvation. Yet, the salvation Jesus brings is something far greater than the people imagined. He brings freedom from the slavery and decay that oppresses every person of every place and time.

That salvation does not become real because someone makes excuses for your sinful nature or the sins you commit. Salvation only becomes real because someone takes your sin away and gives you divine righteousness in its place. That someone is Jesus. That's what Jesus comes to do. This righteous King doesn't come to receive His subjects' flattery. No, He comes to carry out their redemption.

In fact, this redemption has already been achieved. So why do we need to hear about it again? Why go through another Church year at all? Why? Because we are more like the donkey that Jesus rides than we care to admit. We are stubborn, willful, and often refuse to budge. We're stuck in the mud and muck of our sins.

Someone outside of us must free us from our former master. We must be driven, driven to where Jesus is going--not to the palace, but to Golgotha, that stony slope of death. Christ drives the donkey--and us--with Him to the cross. But we don't want to go.

The flesh wants none of it. A parade sounds lovely; a trip to the executioner does not. Honoring Jesus with decorations, ornaments, and artificial lights makes no demands of us. Honoring Jesus with our lives

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does! But are you not baptized? Doesn't the Scripture say that everyone who is baptized into Christ has been clothed with Christ? Indeed!

Yet, the crowd, who spread their garments before Jesus, does show us in some way what we should do. When we spread the thoughts and yearnings of our hearts, under His feet like garments, Jesus enters us with all of His being. Jesus does this, so He may draw all of who we are into Him and put all of Him into us [St. Andrew of Crete]. You honor Christ by receiving what He gives--forgiveness--and responding with merciful deeds to your neighbor.

This season of Advent is not only for us to remember Christ's first coming. It's also to prepare for His second, when He comes to be our judge. Left on your own, that judgment can only result in damnation, doom, and darkness forever. But lift your eyes and lift your hearts, for you are not alone. See, your King comes to you since you cannot come to Him. So in love, He comes to you. He comes, not as your judge, but as your Savior, because He is righteous and brings salvation.

When you sing the liturgy, sing it. But do not sing it as the crowds lining the entrance to Jerusalem. Their songs were loud but were silenced too soon. Their songs were quickly overcome by the demands of the world. Their singing too quickly gave way to the wishes of the flesh. Let it not be so with you. Sing it, sing it!

Sing it with all you have: "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" Let the liturgy resound and echo through everything you do and say. Welcome Him today as your King. See where your King Jesus goes and what the end of His journey will be. Ask to go with Him, even knowing the end of His journey, death, is also your end.

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But oh, what follows! Christ's resurrection is also your resurrection. Then we will have, in full, what God gives us in His Divine Service: salvation, His righteousness, and His rule and reign. When Jesus rules in eternity, the leaves no more will fall, the winter will no more come. In eternity, death is undone, and the demons are banished. In eternity, there is only the bright light of the Lamb and His Father, and shouts of Hosanna that never end.

Indeed, "blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord."
Amen.