

Eulogy for Jesus

In the name of our coming King, dear friends in Christ: Perhaps it struck you as odd that the Gospel reading for this, the first Sunday in Advent, describes the events that took place on Palm Sunday – which happened one week before Easter. That might seem strange because, after all, Advent is the season of the church year in which we prepare for the coming of Jesus at Christmas. This is the time of year we make the mental journey back to the time before the Son of God was born into the world as our brother in flesh, and we look forward with expectation to the step by step unfolding of the Lord's plan to save us from our sins – the plan that begins to be fulfilled at Jesus' birth and then proceeds through his three year ministry and then only at the end of it does it include his passion, death, and resurrection. By starting the church year with Palm Sunday, we seem to be jumping the gun – leaping over everything: Jesus' birth, his youth, his baptism, his miracles, his teaching, the gathering of his disciples—all of that – as if we're in this crazy, headlong rush to get to the end. Does that make sense?

The answer, surprisingly enough, is yes, it makes perfect sense. You see, the church year ended last week on what we call the Sunday of Fulfillment. The theme was how we are now looking forward to the coming of the ascended and exalted Christ. He's coming in power and glory to raise the dead and to judge the earth. He will cast the wicked and unbelieving into the Lake of Fire with Satan and his angels, and he will welcome the faithful into the joyful paradise he's prepared for them in the new heavens and new earth. It will be a day of terror and condemnation for some; but for us, we who believe and eagerly look for his return, it will be the fulfillment of all that we have been promised and all that we have hoped for in Christ.

And what makes it so for us is Christ's first coming: his coming in humility and weakness, his coming to bear our sins, his coming to die on the cross as the sacrificial Lamb of God. And at no time do we see that more clearly than on Palm Sunday when Jesus presents himself as the sacrifice. He appears as the humble king riding a lowly donkey, and he's welcomed into the city of Jerusalem by a ragtag crowd who put on for him a makeshift parade. So, at the beginning of Advent *we do* set the clock back. We set it back to the place that shows the reason for Christ's first coming and why it is we can look forward to his second coming. And we join his followers in proclaiming, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!"

And that's what I'd like to talk about this morning: these phrases of acclamation that are applied to Jesus and his kingdom by the crowd. I'd like to examine what they mean because there's some confusion about them. And if we're going to say something to Jesus, we ought to know what it is we're saying. Take the word *Hosanna*, for example. What does it mean? Most folks assume that it's an ascription of praise of some kind, a way to tell Jesus we think he's a wonderful guy. But that's not right. The truth is that it's a prayer. The word *Hosanna* is derived from the Hebrew word *Yasah*, which means "he saves". It's the same word that is the root of such biblical names as Hosea, Isaiah, Joshua, and (you guessed it) Jesus (or Yeshua, as he would have been called). So what you've got in *Hosanna* is a combination of *Hosiah*, which means "save us" and the ending *na* which is a particle of entreaty. It's what a beggar would end a plea with. It means "Oh, please, won't you?" and "I need this immediately and in the worst way". So the people crying out *Hosanna* to Jesus are really saying, "Please save us right now" you who come in the name of the Lord. And that's especially fitting for two reasons. The first is that the name of the Lord is *Jesus*, and his name means "The Lord saves" – so it's "save us

now, the Lord saves". See how that works? And the second reason it's so fitting is that's precisely what Jesus has come to Jerusalem to do: save his people from their sins by giving up his life on the cross. It's nice the way it all fits together.

The crowd also says, "*Blessed* is he who comes" and "*Blessed* is the coming kingdom". I'd like to unpack that. In our day, we usually use the word *blessed* to mean having been favored by God with material goods or special talents. We just celebrated Thanksgiving and everyone was encouraged to count their blessings and to be grateful to God for them. And that's one way to use the word *blessed*; but that's not the meaning in the context of today's Gospel. The people aren't saying that Jesus has been blessed by God with goods and abilities. Nor in some of our services when I say to you, "Let us bless the Lord" do I mean, "Let's give God things". That's not what it means.

No. And to understand what it does mean, it may be helpful to know that the word *blessed* that's used here might better be translated *eulogized*. You've heard of a eulogy before. It's what you hear at many funerals. It's when somebody stands up and says nice things about the deceased. And that makes sense because the word *eulogy* comes from two Greek words: *eu*, which means *good*; and *logos*, which means *word*. So a *eulogy* is a speech made up of good words about a person – like I said, usually a dead one. But you won't hear any eulogies at a Lutheran funeral (at least you shouldn't). We don't do that. We don't want to create the faulty impression or support the popular but utterly wrong idea that the person who died somehow earned a place in God's kingdom by being good. That's a denial of the Gospel. No, we want to stress the truth that the person who died was a sinner, a sinner saved by grace alone through faith alone in the Lord Jesus Christ. The only person who gets eulogized at a Lutheran funeral is Jesus who did all the work of salvation for the one who passed on into glory.

That's what this crowd of people in Jerusalem is doing: they are *eulogizing* Jesus. They are saying terrific things about him. They are calling him the long-expected Messiah of Israel. They are calling him the heir to the throne of David. They are hailing him as king. And they are saying great things about his kingdom as well. They know from the prophets that the reign of David's heir will bring to them a kingdom of peace, prosperity, and freedom from the oppression of their enemies. And so they say, "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!"

And all of that sounds good. The trouble is they don't mean it; at least not in the way they should. You see, they were looking for a quick fix. They were thinking only in terms of the physical and temporal. When they cried "Hosanna", they meant "Save us from Roman occupation". When they said, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord", they meant, "Here's the guy who will restore Israel's former glory and our domination over our neighbors". When they said "Blessed is the kingdom", they meant, "We'll have money in our pockets, nice houses to live in, no taxes to pay, and slaves to do all our work." They had no concept that Jesus was here to save them from powers far more oppressive than Rome. He was here to save them from Satan, from sin, and from death. They didn't understand that Jesus would be a king who would rule over them not physically, but rather in their hearts and minds by his Holy Spirit. They didn't know that his kingdom would be the Christian Church in which they would have peace with God, the heavenly treasures of his forgiveness and mercy, and the freedom to live righteously as the children of God.

And later that week, when they found out that Jesus wasn't delivering what they wanted, most of them turned on him. They switched sides and joined the enemies of Jesus in saying all manner of bad things about him. When the high priest needed witnesses to testify against Jesus, they didn't have any trouble finding them. Never mind that what these witnesses said

was false and clearly self-contradicting. It didn't matter. The Jewish court had already made up its mind to condemn their prisoner. And then, when they took him to the Roman authorities, the crowd who had once eulogized Jesus spoke up again: "Crucify him!"

The real irony is who eulogized Jesus then. While almost everyone else was uniting in speaking ill of Jesus, it was Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, who said, "I find no fault in him". It was he who also ordered that the placard upon which was written the crimes of the accused that was displayed above his head on the cross to read: "This is the king of the Jews." Then there was thief on Jesus' right hand who said, "This man has done nothing wrong" and "Remember me, Lord, when you come into your kingdom." And finally there was the Roman centurion, the man in charge of crucifying him, who said after Jesus died, "Surely, this was a righteous man and the Son of God." These are the ones who gave the eulogy for Jesus.

But what about us? As I said before, today we join the Palm Sunday crowd in crying out these ancient phrases of acclamation to Jesus: "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes ... Blessed is the coming kingdom ..." But unlike them, we actually understand what these phrases are supposed to mean. We understand who Jesus really is and we know the mission that he's come to accomplish. Bearing this in mind, my question is: do we mean these phrases when we say them?

When you say to Jesus, "Hosanna!" do you mean it? It's supposed to be a desperate plea for rescue. From what? From yourself. From your own sinful nature. From the habitual sins that infect you, from the inherent selfishness that taints all your relationships, from greed and lying and cursing and impatience and pride and gossiping and laziness and ingratitude and ... well, you get the idea. Take a look at today's collect. That's the prayer of the church for the day (it's printed in your bulletin). It says "Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come, that by Your protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Your mighty deliverance." Do you sense the anguish in that plea? It speaks of a deep-seated dissatisfaction and discomfort with the way things are in our lives. We're saying that we hate our lives full of sin, we don't like the things we do, and that we long to be delivered from ourselves and the evil that we continuously think, say, and do. That's what we're saying when we say to Jesus "Hosanna!" But do you mean it?

Or are you in truth quite comfortable and content with your life as it is. "Sure, I'm a sinner; but my sins aren't *that* big a deal. There's nothing really serious about them. And while I could be more faithful to God, more loving to others, more eager to serve them, eh, I'm getting by all right. What I really wish the Lord would do is straighten everyone else out so that my life would be better. My problems are my spouse, my kids, my parents, my boss, some of my neighbors and the people I work with. Lord, why don't you work on saving them from their sins." Is that more like the way it is? And if so, how is that very different than the people who shouted Hosanna at Jesus on Palm Sunday?

Or again, when we say, "Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord" and "Blessed is the coming kingdom", do we mean that? Are we eulogizing Jesus, saying wonderful things about him and what he's done for us? Are we saying we love our life under his gracious rule in his kingdom, his Church? Sure, we're saying the words, the sounds of the syllables are coming out of our mouths ... but do we mean them?

Often in the past the Lord said to his people, "You honor me with your lips, but your hearts are far from me." Could this be true of us? Do you really want Jesus ruling your heart and mind by his Spirit? Do you want to surrender yourself to his will? Or would you prefer to

hold something back for yourself? Or how about your life in his kingdom? Do you really think of the Church as a blessed place? Do you come here hungering and thirsting for the righteousness that Jesus gives you? Do you sense a wave of relief when you confess your sins and you hear the sure words of absolution – that for Christ’s sake you are forgiven? Do you long to have the teachings of Jesus fill your ears? Do you long for Jesus coming to you bodily – right into your mouth – with the bread and wine of the Sacrament? And how about your thoughts about those who stand with you in the Church? They are just as forgiven and sanctified and indwelt by the Holy Spirit as you are. They are part of the body of Christ and children of God, just like you. Do you eulogize them? Or in your heart are you thinking that there are a few that don’t deserve to be here? Who haven’t quite cleaned up their acts to within acceptable standards? Who aren’t pulling their weight? Who really should be doing more? Do you understand that when you bad mouth them – even if it’s only in your mind – you are speaking ill of Christ’s kingdom?

Listen, I’m not asking these questions to be mean. Instead I’m trying to show how desperately sick with sin we are – and how much we really should mean these words that we speak so often half-heartedly and without understanding what we are saying and why. Because if we do understand the situation as it is, we will mean them. We’ll realize just how wretched and in need of salvation we are. And when we cry out Hosanna to Jesus, Save us now, we’ll understand also that he is coming, coming to us in humility, hidden in his Word and Sacraments; and we’ll mean it when we eulogize him and say “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the kingdom of our father David. Hosanna to him who comes to us from on high – who comes to save us.”

He did come to save. He still does come to us to save. And there comes a Day when he will come and save us completely and forever. And then we will spend eternity eulogizing him for all that he has done for us.

Therefore we pray: Lord, hasten the arrival of that Day; and keep us prepared to welcome you aright, now and always. In your holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!