

### ***The King of Contrasts***

In the name of our King, dear friends in Christ: today, with all of Christendom we celebrate Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem where he is hailed as king. But he is a king like no other the world has ever known: his kingdom is not of this world, his citizens are of every race and inhabit every nation on the globe, and he personally conquered the heart and mind of each of his citizens not by force of military might, but rather by the power of his spoken word. We too were spoken into his kingdom, either first in Holy Baptism or by hearing his Gospel proclaimed; but however we got in originally, we are kept in his kingdom in precisely the same way: by continuing to hear what our King has to say to us. And what this means is that he rules over us primarily by his teaching. As he talks to us and reveals the sublime spiritual truths of the Kingdom of God, we are changed from the rebellious sinners we are and transformed into his good and faithful subjects. So his teaching is absolutely essential to us.

And you know, one of the ways Jesus teaches us is through his parables. Some of them, like the one about the Prodigal Son or the Good Samaritan are among his best remembered and dearly loved teachings. When teaching by parable, Jesus would take simple, everyday concepts that everyone can understand and use them to explain the mysterious way God operates in the world by showing how there are similarities between the two. So a parable teaches by *comparison*.

But another way Jesus teaches the mysteries of the Kingdom is by making his points through *contrast*; that is, he illumines spiritual realities by showing how different God's truth is from what we would expect. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount he says, "You have heard it said, 'Love your friends and hate your enemies'; but I tell you to love your enemies, do good to those who despise you ... for by so doing you show yourselves to be children of your Father in heaven who causes his sun to shine on the just and on the wicked." Or again, on another occasion he told his disciples, "In the kingdoms of this world men struggle for position so they can lord it over each other; but in the kingdom of God things are not so. Let him that would be the greatest among you become the servant and slave of all." When Jesus teaches by contrast, he shows how surprisingly different God is from the way we normally think. And the reason I mention all of this is because today's Gospel lesson is packed with examples of Jesus' teaching by contrast. And by exploring a few of these contrasts, I'd like to highlight the truths he reveals to us today.

Perhaps the most obvious contrast is in the triumphant entry into Jerusalem itself. Here's Jesus, the Creator and King of the entire universe, and great David's long expected greater son, coming to his capital city after a three-year campaign of showing his supremacy and power over the combined forces of nature, Satan, sin, disease, and even death. He has won the hearts and captured the imagination of the people. This is his hour, his moment of glory. We would expect a spectacle of celebration the likes of which has never been seen.

Instead, the whole "triumphant" entry is surprisingly understated. No magnificent preparations have been made for his coming. There are no local dignitaries to greet him with honors; no banners, no bands or trumpet blasts, no military escorts. The religious leaders, the ones who should most be ready to welcome him, are openly antagonistic. They want him to go away. What little is done to honor the King is more the spontaneous reaction of a crowd consisting mostly of the city's poor and disenfranchised. As he approaches they lay down a

makeshift “red carpet” by strewing straw, palm branches, and their own soiled clothes on the ground before him. Their hearts are more or less sincere, even if their flagging interest in Jesus leans more toward their mistaken ideas about who he is and why he’s come; but let’s face it: the whole affair is so shabby and impromptu that it appears more comic than stately.

In an effort to show their earnestness the crowd chants verses of some familiar worship Psalms they know; though probably (like many of us) without much understanding of what they’re really saying. “Hosanna!” they cry, which is not an ascription of praise, as many of them believe; but rather a desperate prayer that means, “O please, save us now!” And Jesus, for his own part, is hardly playing the role of a conquering hero. He’s not mounted proudly on his sleek and mighty battle charger—he doesn’t own one. All he’s got is a borrowed donkey. And have you ever seen anyone look dignified or majestic while riding a donkey? I don’t think it’s possible.

The pathetic parade moves on, winding its way through Jerusalem’s narrow streets, and climbing steadily toward the temple complex on Mount Moriah’s height. But when it arrives there, it just seems to fizzle out. There’s no coronation ceremony or climax like we might expect—not even a major confrontation with his enemies. Instead, the crowd that accompanied him seems to just vanish, everyone slinking off and filtering back to their homes. Jesus spends a few moments looking around at what’s going on, no doubt disappointed with a lot of what he sees; but it’s late so he goes back to Bethany where he came from. It makes us want to ask, “What? After all this commotion, is that all?”

And yet, in the contrast between what happened and what we might have expected, Jesus teaches us something about how it is that comes to us. He does not enter our lives as the conquering hero who is going to put us under his thumb and control our lives. He does not come demanding that we submit to his Lordship and rule. Instead Jesus comes to us in humility, not as the conqueror to be obeyed, but rather as the suffering and dying Lamb of God that we need to save us from our sins. Though he is our Lord, he comes to serve not to be served. He doesn’t come expecting our polished praises; instead, he’s here to hear our prayers and respond to our needs—needs that very often we don’t even know we have.

This is how he comes to us today. No royal preparations or demands for us to accomplish great things to get ready for his coming, he enters our humble assembly right here—more than that: he comes right into our filthy hearts—to serve and to save. And he doesn’t come in glorious majesty; but in his humble Word and under the simple elements of bread and wine to deliver what we need to know that we are forgiven. And though he sees a lot of problems in our lives that need to be fixed, he knows he’s not going to get it all done today. Tomorrow he’ll be back. He patiently returns day after day to confront, to cleanse, to heal, and to teach so that over time we grow in faith and in his love.

A second point of teaching by contrast Jesus makes in this lesson is a little more subtle. It has to do again with the donkey that Jesus is riding. We’re specifically told that this animal is young and has never been placed under a burden. Now, I’m no expert on donkeys, but I do know that they have a reputation for being less than cooperative even after they have been thoroughly trained. So what do you suppose would happen if you attempted to ride an untrained donkey? It’d be a rough ride, to say the least. Now imagine trying to ride the untrained donkey with calm control through an excited, shouting crowd. It’s not going to happen. And yet, it seems that’s exactly what does happen. Far from a making a scene that resembles a hilarious rodeo event, this young animal, quite against its nature, peacefully allows the Lord to be carried on its back.

That's the point of contrast being made. This dumb donkey knows his master, and willingly submits to him. He knows that the Lord places upon him a light and easy burden. Specifically, he allows himself to be a vehicle to carry the Lord. That was God's plan and mission for the Jewish nation. They were supposed to know their Lord and be the vehicle to make him known throughout the world. Unfortunately, their history was one of ... well, being more like what you'd expect of an *untrained* donkey. They repeatedly tried to throw the Lord off their backs, and they stubbornly resisted either being led by the carrot or driven by the stick. They failed miserably in their mission.

And in the contrast between the behavior of this donkey and that of the Jewish people there is a sharp rebuke for them. There is also a demonstration for us of how the Lord is able to change our natures and put us to productive work for his Kingdom. It presents us with the question, "Now that the Lord has come into your life and served you by untying you from your bondage to sin, will you now let him change your nature so that you too can serve him and be the vehicle to carry him into the lives of others?"

The third and final point of contrast I'd like to point out is the episode with the fig tree. It's a strange story that presents us a side of Jesus that seems uncharacteristically and unreasonably harsh. It's in the morning the next day, on his way back into Jerusalem. Jesus is hungry. He spies a fig tree that is green and inviting. He goes over to pick himself something to eat for breakfast, but he's disappointed. There's no fruit on it. And it's small wonder, for St. Mark tells us that it's not the season for figs. That makes sense, because Jesus is here for the Passover, a festival that falls in the early spring. Figs don't come on until August. You might have thought that Jesus, having lived in Palestine for all these years would know that. Nevertheless, he curses this tree for its failure to provide the fruit he's looking for.

It hardly seems fair to curse a tree for not having fruit when its fruit is not in season. But that's exactly why Jesus does it. He's drawing your attention by doing something *really* unexpected. He wants you to sit up and take notice because this is important. And to understand exactly what Jesus is saying to us here, you need to know that in the Scriptures the nation of Israel was often referred to as a fig tree: a special fig tree in the garden of the world that God himself had planted, fertilized, and cared for with lavish attention. Why? Because he wanted it to bear fruit. And now, after long centuries of patience and care, the Lord has come into his city expecting to find such fruit – which is long, long overdue. But he's not finding any.

There is a stern warning in the cursing of this tree, and it's being made by way of contrast. The point is this: if Jesus curses a tree which cannot be expected to have fruit, how much more will the curse of God fall on the people who have been carefully cultivated and painstakingly nurtured for all these years and yet, despite it all, still fail to show any signs of bearing fruit?

The warning is for us too. We know how the curse fell on the Jewish nation: it was completely wiped out. Now we collectively—and you individually—are the tree that God is carefully cultivating. He's been caring for you with his love and grace, and giving you his precious Word and Sacraments. Now he has every right to expect you to bear the fruit he's looking for. The question is, "Is your Christian life just a covering of fig leaves? – Is it all appearances? Or is there something of substance there? Will Jesus find what he's looking for in you?"

Today your King comes to you, righteous and having salvation. He comes to you in stark contrast to the ways of the world we live in. He comes in humility to serve and to save you

by his death and resurrection exactly for your stubborn resistance to his leading and for your failure to produce the fruit he desires. Therefore, recognizing our failures and repenting of our sins, let's open our hearts to receive him again today. With full understanding of our desperate need, let's cry out to him, "Hosanna! Save us now!" And he will, for that is why he's come: to save us by his bloody death on the cross. And rising again, he will raise us also. And he will give us the grace to change our lives so that they will stand in stark contrast to our former way of doing things. By his love for us, he will produce in us the fruit he desires, and give us the will and means to carry his precious name to others. So let us join together in praying, "Hosanna! Lord Jesus; hosanna in the highest! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Even so, come Lord Jesus, our Savior and our King. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***