

The Lamb of God

In the name of him who comes in the name of the Lord, dear friends in Christ: Today we observe the triumphant entry of the Lord Jesus into the city of Jerusalem. Though it was an event the prophets had foretold five hundred years earlier, it wasn't something that had been long planned by humans – and especially not by the city's religious leaders. Rather, it was more a spontaneous response of the crowd to the arrival of the famed miracle-working prophet from Galilee. As such, it was remarkably understated. There was no chariot for him to ride in, no band or trumpeters to herald his coming, no banners displaying his cause or coat of arms. There was also no official delegation representing the city fathers to welcome him. Instead, the Creator and King of the universe rides into the city of his glory on a borrowed donkey amidst a crowd consisting of the country folk who have followed him thus far now joined together with some of the city's teeming poor, unwashed, and disenfranchised. It really is a low-budget, rag-tag affair. For his flag they wave palm branches cut from the trees. And to roll out a makeshift red carpet for him, they use their soiled and grimy outer garments. But though the gestures lack refinement, they are at least sincere. And sincerest and most precious of all are the prayerful acclamations they chant, "Hosanna to the Son of David. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" – all of which are very messianic in nature. The word "Hosanna" means "oh please, save us now!" And so by using these words when speaking to and about Jesus, the crowd is announcing that Jesus is the long promised Savior of the nation. And that is the true meaning and significance of this shabby little parade: to announce to God's people that their Savior and Deliverer had come to rescue them from bondage to sin and death.

But I'd like to leave this impromptu parade held in Jesus' honor in order to talk about another one that took place here on this very same day. That parade happened a bit earlier; and for sure it was much larger and grander affair. You can bet that the religious officials especially were paying close attention. For this was the tenth day of the month of Nissan; and according to the Law of Moses, it was the day on which the Passover lambs were to be identified and set aside. And so it was on this day that thousands of lambs were herded into the city of Jerusalem. They came from where they had been pastured around Bethlehem, about five miles south of the city. It was the village where King David had been a shepherd as a boy – *and* not coincidentally, where it was to shepherds that angels announced the birth of great David's greater Son. The Passover lambs were now brought from there, and amid much fanfare and rejoicing, they were led through the winding streets of the city to the temple stockyards. There they would be inspected by the priests and certified as "one year old males without blemish", and thereby pronounced fit to serve for both the required Passover sacrifices and the following family suppers of celebration.

And there would have been a lot of such suppers, for Passover was one of the Jewish pilgrim festivals. To celebrate it properly, you had to be in Jerusalem – because only at the Temple in Jerusalem were you allowed to make sacrifices. So the city would have been filled to overflowing with visitors. Jews from all over the known world would have flocked to be there for this important holiday, which was for them what to us would be like a combination of Christmas and Independence Day – but even bigger. It was the day they celebrated God's mighty deliverance of his people from slavery in Egypt: how he had stretched forth his hand to smite the firstborn of Egypt and how he protected his own people with the blood of lambs smeared on their doorposts. These lambs were then roasted whole and eaten by God's people in the safety of their homes while death literally passed over them. So the lambs were both saviors and food for the journey when the next day the Egyptians released the people, begging them to leave,

and practically driving them out of their country. The Lord ordered his people to retell and reenact this important night of their salvation annually. And they did; the themes of Passover speaking to the people's hearts and souls about how they had been chosen by God, how much he loved them, and to what lengths he would go to show it. And an important part of the holiday was keeping this special covenant of God's grace alive by passing down the story of their salvation through the generations. It was about teaching the children – children of all ages, from eight months to eighty years – about God's love *for us*. So it was very much a time of family gathering, closeness, and togetherness. And to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem with your family, especially if you were a Jew who lived outside the country, was the highpoint of the year.

And what kicked off the festive mood and announced that the holiday was officially upon us was this parade of lambs – sort of like Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade kicks off the Christmas shopping season. And the thing about these lambs was that to celebrate, every family had to have one. It's like turkeys at Thanksgiving or trees for Christmas, except it wasn't just "oh, let's get one for tradition's sake"; it was a religious obligation. You got one because *God said you had to have one*. They were to celebrate their deliverance with lambs because that's what the Lord had used to deliver them in the past – and that's what he wanted them to remember and to reinforce: that they were saved from oppression and bitter bondage by the blood of the Passover lamb.

Unfortunately, however, there are always people who take advantage of good things and turn them for evil purposes. The Passover lambs were no exception. In our day we sometimes think of the commercialization of Christmas as something new and scandalous; but the fact is that all throughout history whenever people have smelled the opportunity to make money, there are no depths to which they are willing to sink. Now, the deal was, according to the Law of Moses, you could bring your own lamb for Passover: one you raised yourself. Of course, it wasn't practical for people who had to travel long distances to come to Jerusalem, but for those who lived in the towns and villages of Judea it would have been fairly easy. But the funny thing was that if you took your own lamb to the temple to have it inspected – after paying a substantial inspection fee – it would invariably get a failing grade from the priests. They'd be sure to detect some small flaw here or there and tell you it couldn't be used. So you'd still end up having to buy one of the pre-approved temple lambs – lambs that were in many cases obviously flawed, but that didn't matter because *they were approved*. Oh, and of course, these certified lambs were *very* expensive, costing far more than they were actually worth. It's called "gouging the consumer". And at that point, if you'd come for the festival with a lamb you brought, you were stuck with what to do with it. You can't very well stay at local motel with a lamb in your room – and no one would want to buy it at a reasonable price because the whole city was full of lambs. So, you'd have to dump it cheap to one of the few people who were buying – people who usually had a back door connection to the temple authorities, so that your unapproved lamb would somehow find its way into the temple stockyard with the approved lambs and be sold to someone else at the premium rate.

The whole thing was quite a scam, and it was being run by the high priest and his very powerful and even *richer* family and their allies. And it was only one of many scams they had going on. As we heard this morning, a good portion of the Temple itself was taken up by a market where moneychangers and the sellers of sacrificial livestock gouged the faithful all year around, thus providing a steady flow of ill-gotten gains to the priests who skimmed the profits from the top. Ah, but the Passover was probably the biggest money making event of the year, so naturally, it was watched over with extra interest by the people who stood to gain the most.

At this point I'm sure you can see some of the many ironies going on and how the coming of Jesus into the city, and more particularly his little parade's arrival at the Temple

courts (if you'll pardon the pun) "really rained on the parade" of the high priest and his associates. Jesus comes on this day in particular because he is the true Lamb of God sent by the Father to be the Passover sacrifice for all. His blood will set the people free from sin and cause the curse of death to pass over them, and his flesh will be spiritual, life-giving food for the journey. And like all the other lambs from Bethlehem, Jesus shows up at the Temple for inspection. What he finds there, however, is all the corruption that's going on: the inflated prices, the dishonest evaluations, the rank thievery and fleecing of the flock by the shepherds of Israel – the very people entrusted to lead God's people in true and holy worship. The priests were deliberately closing their eyes to all this filth and were thereby literally crippling the nation's spiritual life. It was appalling; so Jesus drove it all out of the Temple.

And then we see him fulfilling the Temple's true purpose himself when the blind and lame come to him. He gives sight to those who cannot see and he heals those who are unable to walk. This is what was supposed to be going on at the Temple in a spiritual sense. Eyes blinded by sin were to be opened by the light of God's Word, and people powerless to please God were to be enabled by faith and trust to walk in his paths. Nothing like that was going on. Now Jesus is here setting it straight.

But then, as if to prove just how bad things had become, we read of the evaluation by the priests and teachers of the Law of Christ, the true Lamb of God. It says, "When they saw the wonderful things he did and heard the children shouting in the Temple area, 'Hosanna to the son of David,' they were indignant." It's really quite amazing. They certainly knew that what was going on before was evil; but they called it good – just like they had approved so many flawed lambs. And now when they see the genuinely good and defect-free Lamb of God healing people and helping them – as they were supposed to be doing – they give him a failing grade. They judge him "unacceptable". And even the little children can see what they can't or refuse to see. It's like the story of *The Emperor's New Clothes*, where it's a child who points out the obvious to those too proud or foolish to admit the truth. So it is here also that children become the teachers of the teachers by proclaiming the praise that God ordained for his Son.

All that having been said, it's time for some application. What are we to make of all this? What lessons should we derive? Let me suggest three things. First, that we should never underestimate sin's power to blind and deceive. It's easy to criticize the villains in this story, but we must remember that each of us is also a slave to sin and just as susceptible as they were to closing our eyes to the truth – especially when we let sin enter our lives and remain like they did. When we knowingly allow sin to enter, then we learn to make compromises and fudge our judgments, until eventually we get all turned around and it becomes impossible to distinguish the truth of God from the lies of the enemy. This is a danger we must constantly guard against.

Secondly, we see in this story how the Lord is control of all things and how he uses even these corrupt priests and their evil practices to bring about the salvation he designed. For we know that it was their rejection of Jesus and their anger at him for threatening their illicit livelihoods that ultimately caused them to want to destroy him and condemn him to death. But in so doing they inadvertently brought about the greatest Passover of all. When the chief priests stood before Pilate and called out, "Let his blood be upon us and on our children", they meant it for evil; but God meant it for good. And even today their angry curse is our prayer: that the blood of God's Lamb may cover us and cleanse us from all sin, causing death and its curse to pass over us without harm.

And finally, seeing from our vantage point the true spiritual messages contained in this episode, we should want to place ourselves always in the lowly crowd, seeking not outward signs of power and glory with all their trappings; but instead, recognizing the true Lamb of God

who comes gently and in humility. It's how he comes to us even today in his Word and under the humble forms of bread and wine in the Sacrament of the Altar. That's where Christ our Passover Lamb is found. And it's why we sing as part of Communion liturgy, "Hosanna, hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord"; and also the ancient hymn of the church called the *Agnus Dei* (which means "Lamb of God"), the words to which go, "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy upon us" and "grant us your peace". Casting off our pride and sins before him like soiled garments, may we allow him to trample them beneath his feet, and grant to us the salvation he purchased with his blood. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!