

“Easter is Just on the Horizon”

Luke 23:1-56

Our Gospel lesson for today was very long. However, this was the shortened version. There was the potential for another 75 verses (I'm not kidding). Even though you can never have too much of God's Word, I refrained. After all, in the 56 verses already appointed, I found very rich text with many different opportunities to tell of the work of Christ during His period of tremendous suffering that we celebrate as Holy Week. Now, since today we are celebrating Palm Sunday, you might be asking some questions about the choice of this appointed Gospel reading.

Why isn't the Gospel the story of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem?
Why is all of Luke Chapter 23 included in the lesson?

This Gospel lesson may not be the story of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey and having "Hosanna in the highest" sung to Him, however, it gives us insight and helps us to understand what happened from Palm Sunday until Easter morning. Christ willingly enters the city even though He knows His journey will end in death on Mt. Calvary, but He presses forward knowing that Easter is also just on the horizon.

When Jesus entered into Jerusalem as King amid the waving palm branches, the people were praising God in loud voices saying, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord." Israel has but one king: God. If only those people had realized what they were really saying.

Luke's Gospel stresses the point that Jesus is the King of the Jews. The

words “king” and “kingdom” appear six times in today’s reading. We begin with the chief priests and teachers of the law accusing Jesus before Pontius Pilate – spewing forth several dubious claims about Christ subverting the nation and opposing taxes to Caesar, which was a bold-faced lie.

But then they accused him of something that was true: “He claims to be Christ, a king.” They got Pontius Pilate to ask the question, “Are you the king of the Jews?”

Jesus answered, “You have said so.”

But Christ came to earth to be more than just a king. He was also both Prophet and Priest. He came as a prophet performing miracles and, as Scripture says, to “preach good news to the poor.” He came as a priest to offer a sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins on behalf of all people.

And Christ’s role as both prophet and king are given value through His priestly sacrifice. Christ’s kingship is defined in that sign placed over the cross. **THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.** And without that event, there would have been no “Good News” to preach and His miracles would have been nothing but an interesting side show.

It is in His crucifixion, much more so than in His triumphant ride into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, that Jesus is recognized as King, as Savior, and as the Son of God. Christ is the King who gives His life for His people, and in so doing, gives life to His people.

The irony of our Gospel lesson is that the priests and teachers of the law, who studied Scripture with great zeal, did not understand what kind of King entered into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. However, the thief, the common, uneducated, criminal understood who that King was hanging next to him, dying.

Rather than mocking God, the Word of God penetrates his heart and confronts him with the reality that his only hope lies in that man Jesus who is

hanging next to him. We say that we do not know much about that thief on the cross. But one thing that we do know is, that very day, he was in Paradise. His journey on earth was about to end in death, but like it was for Christ, Easter was just on the horizon.

It is not the level of education we have achieved which allows us to confidently proclaim our faith. Our faith is not an intellectual exercise. It is the Holy Spirit who has created faith in us at our Baptism. We find it amazing that a crucified thief could gain such insight when the scribes and teachers of the law were blind to who Christ was.

But then, is it really any more amazing than what we have experienced. It is not our great intellect, education, or life of righteousness which gave us insight. Faith was created and freedom from the guilt of our sin was brought to us through no work of our own. And, like the thief, we rejoice as the gates of heaven have been opened to us.

Certainly, it is a day to rejoice. And with those people on Palm Sunday, we sing Hosanna: Hw-shana (in Hebrew) "Save us now, we pray." We continually ask this of our Lord, and Savior, and King. Save us now, we pray.

We have been saved. Thanks be to God that He sent our King not to just ride into a city, but to hang on a cross. It is the people at Christ's cross that should have been singing "Hosanna": save us Lord. But only the thief hanging next to Him offered such a plea.

We celebrate Palm Sunday with "Hosanna's" to our King, even though, like with Christ and the thief, our journey will end in death, but we press forward in the face of trials, difficulties, tragedies, even death, knowing that Easter is just on the horizon. Amen.