

### 12.3.2023 Advent 1 (St. Matthew 21:1-13)

To the casual reader, our Gospel lesson on this first Sunday in Advent seems to be quite out of place. With Christmas Day quickly approaching, many people might expect to hear a reading about the Angel Gabriel greeting the Blessed Virgin Mary with the declaration, "*Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favor with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son...*" (Luke 1:30-31), or perhaps the selected passage would be one that describes an angel appearing to Joseph in a dream, saying, "*Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins*" (Matthew 1:20-21).

There's certainly a long list of familiar, nostalgic biblical passages that we might find most suitable for this Sunday morning, but I suspect none of the passages on that list would include the text we read today. On this first Sunday in Advent, as you know, the appointed reading is St. Matthew's account of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. From a historical perspective, reading a text that describes Palm Sunday on the first Sunday in Advent is unusual, but if we consider the text symbolically, we will find it is not out of place at all. In fact, from a symbolic perspective, the passage contains a striking message about the advent of our Lord. His coming, not to Jerusalem, but to every one of us. His arrival, not at the holy city, but at the entrance to our hearts. His holy presence, not in a temple made with hands, but in our bodies - the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19).

In this Gospel lesson, Matthew describes our Lord entering Jerusalem as the King of the Jews, the Promised Messiah, the Redeemer, who as the angel declared, would *save His people from their sins*. On Palm Sunday, Jesus entered the holy city as the King, but not as the conquering king so many expected. Our Lord didn't ride into Jerusalem in a chariot or on a war-horse. Instead, He came to His people in great humility, He came "*meek, and sitting upon a donkey, and a colt the foal of a donkey*" (Matthew 21:5), and this is how He comes to each of us.

Our Lord and our God comes to you and I in great humility. During the season of Advent we are often reminded of the way the Creator chose to enter His creation. Two thousand years ago, when our Lord clothed Himself in human flesh, He was born in a stable and slept in a feed trough, and as He comes to us today, Jesus continues to demonstrate such complete humility. The book of Revelation depicts His humble way using the imagery provided by these words, *“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me”* (Revelation 3:20). The King of kings, in meekness and humility, descends to knock at the door of our heart. It is there that Jesus Christ stands patiently knocking, beseeching us to open our hearts and allow Him to enter in. This passage offers a beautiful image of the way Christ yearns to love every one of us, it provides us with a vivid picture of God’s patient and continual loving pursuit of you - His beloved.

Our Savior knocked, and on Palm Sunday the crowd welcomed Him in, they spread clothing and palm branches on the road in front of our Lord, and those that went ahead of Him and those that followed shouted, *“Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”* (Matthew 21:8-9). They welcomed our Lord into the holy city, and Jesus *“went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the money-changers, and the seats of them that sold doves, and said unto them, It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves”* (Matthew 21:12-13).

When the crowd welcomed Him, Jesus didn’t remain idle in the city, He went into the temple of God to cleanse it of the evil that was occurring there. Quoting the Old Testament prophets Isaiah (56:7) and Jeremiah (7:11), Jesus said, *“It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves.”* The temple was designed by God, and He intended it to be a sacred place of worship and prayer, a place where God dwelt with His people, and a house of prayer not only for the Jews, but *“for all people”* (Mark 11:17), a place where the prayers of all nations would rise to the presence of God, but the people had corrupted what was meant to be sacred by buying and selling and using the temple for their own gain. What was designed to be a sanctuary for the righteous, a place to meet God and worship

Him, had become a den of thieves, a refuge for the wicked.

This historical description of the way God, in the Person of Jesus Christ, entered His temple and performed this cleansing work finds a symbolic parallel in our own lives when consider the truth, revealed in Scripture, that *“your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit”* (1 Corinthians 6:19). Like the temple in Jerusalem, but in the most personal and intimate way, we were designed by God - created to be His dwelling place here on earth. A sacred place of worship and prayer, a holy place where God chooses to manifest Himself not only to His people, but to people of every nation. As Jesus declared, *“You are the light of the world”* (Matthew 5:14), a city set on a hill that cannot be hid.

Our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit, and there is a work of cleansing and sanctification that God intends to complete in every one of us. By His grace we are people who’ve heard His knock, and the sound of His voice. We’ve opened the door, and Jesus, once the door is open, doesn’t stand idly at the threshold of our hearts. Though at times, in error and selfishness, we may prefer to keep Him there, God enters in, and just as our Lord *“cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the money-changers, and the seats of them that sold doves,”* Jesus casts out and overthrows those things we use for our own selfish gain in His holy temple, those things we try to hide in the deepest recesses of hearts.

If, for a moment, you picture our Lord in the Jerusalem temple overthrowing tables and casting out all those who bought and sold, you’ll have some idea of the cleansing work God is accomplishing in you. Bringing this image to mind reminds us that such cleansing is a painful process, and C.S. Lewis describes it well. Commenting on the thought that none of us have *“the slightest notion of the tremendous thing God means to make of us,”* a temple of His Holy Spirit, Lewis asks his reader to: *“Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of - throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra*

floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.”

On the first Palm Sunday, two thousand years ago, the crowd cried Hosanna as they welcomed our Lord into Jerusalem. On this first Sunday in Advent we celebrate His coming, not to Jerusalem, but to every one of us. His arrival, not at the holy city, but at the entrance to our hearts. His holy presence, not in a temple made with hands, but in our bodies - the temple of the Holy Spirit. By His grace, in this season may we come to a greater knowledge of “the tremendous thing God means to make of us.” May we begin to recognize the unimaginable miracle that our “*body is a temple of the Holy Spirit,*” a sacred place of worship and prayer, not a decent little cottage, but a palace in which God dwells.