



Sermon on the Old Testament Lesson for Palm Sunday Zechariah 9:9-12

Fr. William Klock

April 17, 2011 — Palm Sunday

I'd like to look this evening at today's Old Testament lesson. Its connection with the Gospel is an obvious one. St. Matthew, in today's Gospel, notes that when the disciples found the donkey and colt in Bethpage, in accordance with Jesus' prophetic instructions, and when Jesus rode that donkey into Jerusalem, it was all in fulfilment of these words spoken by Zechariah five-and-a-half centuries before. But what was the significance of those words to the Jews when they originally heard Zechariah speak them?

Zechariah was one of the men who returned from exile in Babylon along with Zerubbabel—about 538 B.C. He was a priest. These exiles went back to Jerusalem to rebuild not only the city and their nation, but also to rebuild the temple. But as a priest it wasn't just the temple that was important to Zechariah—so were holiness, right worship, and the peoples' commitment to God.

Zechariah started his ministry about twenty years after the people got back to Judah. When they left Babylon with Cyrus' approval, they had great plans and visions. They were going to rebuild Judah to its old greatness. The problem was that their visions weren't very realistic. The fact is that there wasn't much left of Judah. They had visions of the Davidic kingdom, but that kingdom fell apart after Solomon's death four hundred years before. It had split in two and gradually degraded and had fallen apart from that point onward. The northern kingdom had been destroyed and the people dispersed. They were going back to Judah—to the smaller southern kingdom. Even that wasn't what it had once been in terms of area. The Babylonians had carved up the whole region. A lot of the land had been given to other people and nations.

These returning exiles had their work cut out for them. And it didn't take very long for reality to set in. In Ezra and Nehemiah

we read about all the troubles they faced. Even though the Emperor had given them permission to return and rebuild, he was far away and the people around them were threatened by these strangers who were now rebuilding Jerusalem. We read how they had to make rebuilding the city wall a priority and built with their swords at hand, to fight off those who wanted to thwart their work.

Pretty soon the people all but gave up on their original mission. They intermarried with the pagan peoples around them. They started living like the pagans around them. They all but forgot about rebuilding the temple as the centre of a restored Judah. The people got discouraged and it just seemed easier to ignore their ideals and just "go with the flow" of the world. Two prophets stepped in to encourage the people to get back on track with their original mission. First Haggai called the people to return to their work of rebuilding the temple. The foundation had been built, but so many other things had come to occupy the attention of the people, that the foundation was as far as they ever got. Then a few years later Zechariah backed up Haggai's call to build the temple with his exhortation. And what Zechariah does is turn the rebuilding of the temple into an object lesson that points to the future restoration of God with his people.

Imagine how the people felt. Even had they not been distracted by all the worldliness and worldly cares around them, they knew that the temple they were building wasn't the same as the temple that had been destroyed. It's not just that it wasn't as grand and glorious as the one built by Solomon, but two very important things were missing: the ark of the covenant was gone and so was the *shekinah*—the visible presence of God. Those two things had been at the centre of the tabernacle and then the temple from the time God had given his law and the people had built the tabernacle under Moses' leadership. The ark sat in the Holy of Holies—its lid the mercy seat—and the glory of God rested on it. The ark was now lost forever and no one had seen the *shekinah* since before the fall of Jerusalem. Maybe these people hoped in some way to get these things back, but I think they knew that they were building a temple that was really, in many ways, just an empty shell. But Haggai and Zechariah urge them to rebuild it anyway.

That temple was a symbol of their commitment to God, even when they weren't aware of his presence with them. God used that second temple to transition the people away from thinking of God's kingdom in terms of a physical place. It transitioned the people away from thinking of God being present with his people in a temple made with hands and pointed them toward a time when his presence would abide in the people themselves through his Holy Spirit.

Zechariah spoke to a people who thought of the kingdom only in terms of a strong nation as had existed in the days of David and Solomon and they thought of God in terms of the temple and a system of imperfect sacrifices for sin. That's what they had so longed for while they were exiles in Babylon. They'd finally been released from exile. They came back to Judah, full of excitement and enthusiasm to rebuild that old kingdom...and then reality set in. They just didn't see any of that happening anymore, so they gave up. And now Zechariah says to them:

**Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!**
(Zechariah 9:9)

And the people would probably have responded: "Right. Why should we rejoice? As far as we can tell, God has abandoned us." And Zechariah goes on:

**Behold, your king is coming to you;
righteous and having salvation is he,**
These people, without a doubt, hoped for a king. But all their hoping just wasn't realistic. They had a king—and emperor—and his name was Cyrus. He might let them rebuild Jerusalem, but their having their own king was out of the question. And yet Zechariah doesn't just promise a king; he promises *the King*—the Messiah. He knew what they didn't: that the Messiah, the King of kings, was their only real hope. The Jews learned over the centuries that earthly kings could never solve their eternal problems. In fact, their kings tended to get them into trouble more than anything else. But the people always seemed to want a king anyway. Had it been possible these returning exiles would have accepted a king in a heartbeat. This was the same King the people were hoping for in Jesus on that first Palm Sunday when he rode into Jerusalem—a king come to re-establish the nation and drive out the foreign oppressors. But God's plan wasn't

to give them another earthly king—it was to give them a heavenly king. Zechariah’s promise isn’t an earthly king riding in on a great war horse. He goes on to describe him as not only bringing righteousness and salvation, but also says that this king comes to his people:

...humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

This is a new kind of King and he comes humbly. In fact, Zechariah says in verse 10:

I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall speak peace to the nations; his rule shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.

This didn’t compute for most people. The King—the Messiah—was coming, but he was coming humbly, riding on a lowly donkey, and he was going to disarm the nation. The people had always relied on horses and chariot and on bows and swords. In fact, it was only because the people armed themselves that they were able to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and it was those strong stone walls that gave them what little peace and protection they had. I’m sure some people laughed at Zechariah: “A humble king, taking away our chariots and our bows to bring peace? Ha!”

And yet Zechariah says that he’ll not only disarm his people, but he’ll rule the earth and bring peace. Actually—more specifically—he’ll bring peace, and because he’ll bring peace, he’ll rule the nations. Again, that’s backwards thinking by worldly standards.

But think about that. The world wants peace, but we think we’ll have peace when a strong ruler or a strong nation forces the trouble-makers into peaceful submission. What we get in the end is a free-for-all and a total lack of peace. My own nation seems convinced that it can bring peace by invading countries that don’t see things our way and imposing democracy and peace at the point of a gun. The problem is that everyone else thinks the same way. Everyone wants peace, but we all want it on our own terms. The world has this foolish idea that we can wage war in order to establish peace. That was the idea

behind World War I. It utterly failed, and yet we continue to do the same thing almost a century later.

No, in contrast, the Great King will establish his kingdom, not by enforcing peace with a sword, but by first establishing a peace that requires no sword to maintain. And this is where the line is drawn between those who understand and those who don’t and between his kingdom and the world. This is where that empty shell of a temple points the people to the futility of horses and chariots and earthly kingdoms. God’s kingdom will never come at the point of a sword or the barrel of a gun. God’s kingdom comes as the King enters the hearts of the people—as he establishes a temple not made with hands. And he builds that new temple as men and women give up their earthly loyalties and trust in the Saviour, allowing him to transform their hearts. He comes humbly—in fact, he came and established his kingdom by first dying for his people—dying as a sacrifice for their sins, that they might be restored to fellowship with God. And as he frees his people from sin and death, his Spirit knits those people together and replaces pride and selfishness and every other sin with the same love and peace and humility that the King himself showed his people on the cross.

The question for us is whether or not we’ve received the King. And if we have received him—if we’ve trusted in the sacrifice for sins he has made for us—are we letting his Spirit transform our lives and our thinking. There are too many Christians who continue to think just like the world. We expect Jesus and his Church to somehow govern the physical world in a way that isn’t much different from those Jews who lined the road on that first Palm Sunday, hailing Jesus as King. They expected him to wield a sword to establish righteousness. We’ve changed things a bit, but not that much. We often fall into the trap of thinking that Jesus will establish righteousness through the collective voting power of his Church—just to name one example. But brothers and sisters, that’s still expecting the kingdom of God to be established by the sword. If Jesus is our Lord, we need to look to his humble example. We need to see that he was humble unto death, that he might win his kingdom not by force, but by love. And friends, if we would

seek to grow God’s kingdom in the same way—by loving and by being willing to sacrifice ourselves—we would truly see his kingdom grow. We pray in the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy kingdom come.” Let us make it a reality as we follow the example of loving humility set by our Lord.

Let us pray: “Almighty and everlasting God, who in your tender love towards mankind sent your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ to take upon him our nature and to suffer death upon the cross so that all mankind should follow the example of his great humility, grant that we may both follow the example of his patience and also have our part in his resurrection, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”