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EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## **The Stone that the Builders Rejected**

St. Matthew 21:1-43

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April 9, 2017 – Palm Sunday

We began our service this morning with a lesson from St. Matthew's Gospel about the first "Palm Sunday". We read about Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem. It was the last time he would make the trip there for Passover. In the little town on the hill opposite the city he made arrangement for a donkey, then he rode down into the valley, back up to the city, and through the gates fulfilling the prophecy spoken by Zechariah long before about a humble king who would come to deliver his people. You and I know where this story is headed. Just in case we might have forgotten, the long Palm Sunday Gospel gives us an opportunity not just to remember but to put ourselves in the story of Jesus' arrest, his trial, and his crucifixion. But the people on that first Palm Sunday had no idea that the story was headed in that direction. Jesus had put two and two together—or maybe we should say that he'd put Moses and Isaiah or the law and the prophets together—and he knew that somehow he was headed to his death, despite the acclaim of the crowd. I have to think that there were a few others amongst his people, wise people steeped in Scripture and who had heard Jesus preach, who might have suspected what was coming. But that Good Friday, that the Cross, were just a few days away, would have been a complete surprise to most. They had heard Jesus preaching good news to the poor; they had seen him heal the sick, the blind, and the lame; they had seen him cast out demons and raise the dead. These were "Messiah things". And even if Jesus didn't always make a lot of sense, even if he was doing other things that didn't fit the narrative

they had in their heads, the Lord, the God of Israel, was clearly with him. And now, here he was riding into Jerusalem on a donkey just as Zechariah had prophesied. He *had* to be the long-awaited King.

Jesus' timing was perfect. There couldn't have been a better time for the King to arrive in Jerusalem. This was Passover. This was the annual festival where the Jews not only remembered how the Lord had delivered them from their bondage in Egypt, but it was also the time when they looked forward with hope to the day when the Lord would deliver them again. The people travelling the road with Jesus were on their way to gather with friends and family to tell the story of Moses and Pharaoh, of the ten plagues, of the angel of death and the Passover lambs, the crossing of the Red Sea, and of the Lord meeting them at last in the wilderness. They were rehearsing a story over a thousand years old, but it was *their* story. This was how they became the Lord's people and how he became their God. It was a story of deliverance in the past and as they retold it each year they expressed their longing for and their faith in God's deliverance in the future. And now, in Jesus, they see the King finally arriving.

There were a lot of other stories of deliverance in Israel's history, but as they waved their palm branches that first Palm Sunday, the people had to have in mind the story of Judas Maccabaeus. Two hundred years earlier, he and his army had marched on Jerusalem. They defeated the Syrian occupiers and retook the city. And after retaking the city, Judas cleansed the temple, which the Syrians had desecrated. The people of Jerusalem had greeted Judas Maccabaeus with palm branches too. For about a century the Jews lived in freedom under the Maccabees and many in Jesus' day were looking for a King to come like Judas, to once again drive out the oppressors.

But Jesus' procession wasn't the only one. Pontius Pilate had his own procession into the city. He lived in Caesarea, down on the Mediterranean coast, but to keep the peace during the Passover as the city was packed with people, Pilate, the Roman governor marched up to Jerusalem with his soldiers. Pilate would have arrived from the opposite direction as Jesus. He might have arrived the day before or later that same day, but it's entirely possible that he and Jesus arrived at the same time, King Jesus representing the Lord, the God of Israel, and Pilate representing the great Caesar. The people caught on. They were expecting a showdown. They saw Jesus on the donkey and they remembered Zechariah's prophecy of the coming King. And in thinking of the King they would certainly also have remembered other prophecies about the King. They sang psalms on the road to Jerusalem and may have been singing some of the royal psalms about the King coming to conquer the nations, breaking them like a rod of iron and smashing them like pottery. Jesus looked pretty humble and peaceful now, but many of the people expected him to throw off the humble itinerant preacher disguise to rise up like another Judas Maccabaeus. He would drive out the Romans, the corrupt Herodian sell-outs, and the corrupt priests who governed the temple.

So we can imagine the excitement of the people when Jesus headed straight for the temple. Our lesson from Matthew 21 in the Liturgy of the Palms stops just short of that bit of the story. Jesus marched into the temple and promptly set about upsetting everything. He drove out the very people who sold animals and made the sacrificial system possible. Jesus' problem wasn't with the buying and selling. Sacrifices required pure animals. Carrying animals all the way from places like Galilee was impractical. They could escape, become maimed, or die on the journey. The people selling animals were offering a needed service and

there was nothing wrong with making a profit—they had to feed their families like everyone else. The money changers were necessary too, because the temple had its own currency. No, Jesus declared that the temple had become a house of brigands or thieves. The word he used refers specifically to violent revolutionaries. The temple was supposed to be the place where the people came to the Lord in prayer, but instead the people had made it the focal point of their hopes and dreams for violent revolution—of another Maccabean revolt and a violent Messiah like Judas. And so Jesus did something that disrupted the temple and that stopped the sacrifices. It was an acted out prophecy declaring that the temple's days were over. God was about to do something new. Jesus had been teaching this all along—and acting it out as well, whenever he healed and forgave and declared people clean and bypassed the temple and the system of ritual and purity. He does it again here in Matthew 21. Jesus brought the sacrifices in the temple to a halt and then, Matthew says, the blind and the lame came to him and were healed.

What kind of King were the people looking for? They were looking for a warrior like Judas Maccabaeus, but Jesus arrived on a donkey and wept over the city because it did not know the way of peace. They were looking for a king to come and restore the temple and to once again make it the centre of the world, but Jesus not acted out a prophecy of its destruction and declared that he would tear it down. They looked for another king like David who would vanquish Israel's enemies, but Jesus instead taught of a king whom the people would reject and murder.

Jesus went back to the temple the next day to teach. Matthew says that the chief priests and elders confronted him to ask by what authority he said and did these things and Jesus threw their question back at them. They were

afraid to answer. If they admitted that the Lord truly was behind Jesus they'd have to answer for rejecting him. If they denied it they would lose the respect and obedience of the common people who loved Jesus and, even if they didn't understand him very well, they could see the obvious: God was at work through him. So the priests and elders simply refused to answer. They were more concerned with their position of authority than with the truth.

Jesus responded with a parable. This is what he said:

**“Once upon a time there was a householder who planted a vineyard, built a wall for it, dug out a winepress in it, and built a tower. Then he rented it out to tenant farmers and went away on a journey. When harvest time arrived, he sent his slaves to the farmers to collect his produce. The farmers seized his slaves; they beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other slaves, more than before, and they treated them in the same way. Finally he sent his son to them. “They’ll respect my son,” he said. But the farmers saw the son. “This fellow’s the heir!’ they said among themselves. ‘Come on, let’s kill him, and then we can take over the property!’ So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. Now then: when the vineyard-owner returns, what will he do to those farmers?” “He’ll kill them brutally, the wretches!” they said. “And he’ll lease the vineyard to other farmers who’ll give him the produce at the right time.”**

**“Did you never read what the Bible says?” said Jesus to them: “The stone the builders threw away is now atop the corner; It’s from the Lord, all this, they say And we looked on in wonder.”**

**“So then let me tell you this: God’s kingdom is going to be taken away**

**from you and given to a nation that will produce the goods. Anyone who falls on this stone will be smashed to pieces, and anyone it falls on will be crushed.”** (Matthew 21:33-44 KNT)

This time the priests and elders understood. We know they understood because Matthew goes on to say that they were angry because they knew the parable was about them. They would have arrested him then and there if it hadn't been for the crowds. You see, they knew a similar story that Isaiah had told long before. In Isaiah 5 the story is about a man who lovingly planted a vineyard, but no matter how well he cared for it, it produced only worthless wild grapes. In the end the man was forced to tear down the wall protecting the vineyard and to let the wild retake it. Isaiah himself had said that the man was the Lord and the vineyard was Israel. But, now, in Jesus version of the story he makes it plain that the problem isn't just the vines producing bad fruit. It's the tenant farmers refusing to acknowledge the vineyard's real owner—the Lord.

Jesus stresses that they've had warning after warning. The Lord sent his prophets, but they rejected and murdered them. Now he's sent his own Son whom they're about to reject and murder too. This is one of the most explicit statements Jesus makes about both his relation to the Lord and about his mission or vocation to bear himself the hatred and violence of the very people to whom he was sent. And here Jesus reminds us of the problem. Again, the people were looking for a David or a Judas Maccabaeus. They were looking for a king who could overpower Caesar. But the King who came will, instead, allow the violence of his own people and of Caesar to crush him. Somehow, Jesus is saying, God's plan will be worked out by everything going terribly wrong in order to make everything perfectly right. The King will let evil—will let sin and death—

do their absolute worst to him. The stone that the builders rejected will somehow end up becoming the cornerstone of a new and better temple. This is where Holy Week is headed. It's not until Easter, when we find the empty tomb and meet the risen Jesus, that it all makes sense.

In the meantime, we need to ask which King *we* are following. The world is a mess. In the last week we've seen violent events that some are even heralding as the possible start of World War III. They might be right and they might be wrong. In light of the fact that we seem now to live in a state of perpetual war—kids my daughters age in my own country have known a time when we haven't been at war—I'm not sure what another world war might look like when it seems much of the world is already at war. Here in Canada we might sit back and think things are better. Our government has been far more circumspect when it comes to conflict abroad. But our domestic life is far from peaceful. Sixty to seventy thousand abortions a year testify to that. And so we need to ask: In what or in whom do we place our hope for peace and a better world? Caesar has failed over and over and over. Many of us place our hope in mammon, but mammon's track record is no better. We need to declare with Solomon, "Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to the royal son! May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice!" (Psalm 72:1-2).

But then we need to ask a more personal question. The Palm Sunday crowd was fickle, hailing Jesus as King on Sunday and crying out for his crucifixion on Friday, but they weren't wrong in their hope for the Lord's deliverance of his people. They longed to see God's kingdom on *earth* as it is in heaven. They hoped for the justice and peace of God to set his Creation to rights. Where they were wrong was in missing, in failing to see the *means* by which Jesus would usher

in God's kingdom, not by violence, but by giving himself. Brothers and Sisters, Jesus calls us to follow him on the road through Holy Week—this road of rejection, and of suffering, and even death. He demands our all. That's what it means to repent—to turn aside from everything that is not him, to turn aside from every source of security that is not him, and to turn aside from every plan that is not his and to give our lives to the task of proclaiming this King who gave his life for the sake of his enemies. It means that we give our whole selves in faith and in hope to make his kingdom known on earth as it is in heaven in practical and tangible ways that through us, no matter the cost, the world may see his justice and his peace, his mercy and his grace.

Let us pray: Almighty and everliving God, in your tender love for mankind you sent your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ to take upon him our nature, and to suffer death upon the cross, giving us the example of his great humility: Mercifully grant that we may walk in the way of his suffering, and also share in his resurrection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*