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A Sermon for Palm Sunday Philippians 2:1-11, St. Matthew 21:1-17, 27:1-54

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One of the buildings that intrigued me the most when I studied architectural history is the Pantheon in Rome. It's absolutely massive. If you're not familiar with it: it's a magnificent round building covered by the world's largest unreinforced concrete dome. It's so impressive, that until I studied the Pantheon in architectural history, I'd always assumed it had been built during the Renaissance. But no. It was built by the Romans in the early Second Century, a testament to their engineering capabilities. That's what the Pantheon is known for.

What doesn't get nearly as much attention is the function of that massive building. It was a temple for all the gods of Rome, hence the name "Pantheon", meaning "all the gods". It was a temple, full of altars and statues of the gods to which they were dedicated. And, in this, it came to represent the imperial power of Caesar and his empire, backed and supported by the power and authority gods. When I read Paul writing about the "principalities and powers" of the present wicked age, I can't help but think of the Pantheon.

But in the Year of Our Lord Six-hundred-and-nine, the Christian Emperor Phocas and Boniface IV, the Bishop of Rome, ordered the by then disused Pantheon stripped of its pagan idols and pagan altars. Twenty-eight cartloads containing the bones of Christian martyrs were exhumed from the catacombs and reburied there. A Christian altar was erected. And the building was dedicated as a church in honour of those martyrs whom the

pagan Romans had murdered in the names of their gods. To this day, over fourteen-hundred years later, the Church of St. Mary and the Martyrs remains there, a faithful witness to the conquest of Rome by the gospel and of the lordship of Jesus the Messiah. A testimony to the power of the cross and the blood of Jesus, not only to purify us from our sins and to make us a dwelling place fit for God's Spirit, but to wash creation itself clean from our sins as well. There is nothing in creation—whether sinful humans or the most pagan of pagan temples—that Jesus cannot purify and redeem and set right for the glory of the living God. But the Pantheon is also a testimony of *how*, of the power of gospel virtue—humility, love, grace, mercy—over the raw power and violence of empire and human endeavour.

Think back to the beginning of Lent. We listened as St. Matthew told us the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. **The devil took him off to a very high mountain and showed him all the magnificent kingdoms of the world.** Off on the horizon was Rome. **"I'll give the whole lot to you," the devil said, "if you will fall down and worship me."**

To rule creation was, after all what Jesus had come for. He was creation's true Lord. Caesar and all the other kings were pretenders, shams, parodies of who and what Jesus really is. All of it, from Jerusalem to Rome and beyond belongs to him. "There is not one square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!" to quote Abraham Kuyper. But this was not the way. Jesus will not reclaim his creation without also setting it to rights, without dealing with the problems of sin and death. Without purifying it from idolatry. without dealing with the very problems that gave us kings in the first place. To do that requires more than raw power.

And so today we hear Matthew again as he tells us of Jesus' triumphal procession into Jerusalem. **When they came near to Jerusalem, and arrived at Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of the disciples on ahead. Go into the village over there and at once you'll find a donkey tied and a foal beside it. Untie them and bring them to me and if anyone says anything to you, say, "The Lord needs them and he'll send them back right away." He sent them off at once.**

Jesus was about to act out another one of his prophecies. This time it was to show and to remind the people what sort of king the Messiah was to be. They did want a king who would set all to rights, but in their heads, to their way of thinking, that meant leading a revolt against the Romans. He would be like David, who defeated the Jebusites to take their city Jerusalem as his capital. He would be like Judas Maccabeus, who defeated the Greeks and established an independent Jewish kingdom under the high priest. The Messiah would be like that, only better, greater, more powerful, and his kingdom would last forever. He would raise up Israel and put the gentile kings under their feet. The day before or maybe even that same day, as Jesus came to Jerusalem from Bethphage, Caesar's governor, Pontius Pilate, was marching into the city from the opposite direction, from his base in Caesarea, at the front of a column of Roman soldiers. They were there to represent Caesar's might and to keep the peace with threat of violence during Passover. If Jesus was the Messiah, now was his time—or so a lot of people thought—now was Jesus' time to finally and really be the Messiah, raise up his army, and cast down Pilate and the Romans and take his throne.

But violence wasn't the way to the throne any more than bowing down to the devil was. Matthew says that Jesus did it his way to remind the people of what the Lord had said about the Messiah through the Prophet

Zechariah: Tell this to Zion's daughter: Look now! Here comes your King. He's *humble*, mounted on a donkey, yes, on a foal, it's young.

The king they expected was going to ride into Jerusalem in a chariot or at least on a great warhorse. But God's king is different. A great warrior might take care of the Romans and even take his throne. He could set things to rights in the way of earthly kings like Caesar, but the world would still be subject to sin and death. So Jesus acted out the prophecy. The disciples brought the donkey and Jesus humbly rode it into the city. And the people cheered all along the way. **They spread their cloaks on the road. Others cut branches from the trees and scattered them on the road. The crowds who went ahead of him, and those who were following behind shouted, "Hosanna to the son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" And the whole city was gripped with excitement when they came into Jerusalem. "Who is this!" they were saying. And the crowds replied, "This is the prophet, Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee.**

The humble king, fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah. But Jesus wasn't done with his acted-out prophecy. Matthew says that on entering Jerusalem, Jesus went straight to the temple and when he got there **he threw out the people who were buying and selling in the temple. He upturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of the dove-sellers. It is written, he said to them, "My house will be called a house of prayer, but you have made it a brigand's lair!" The blind and lame came to him in the temple and he healed them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the remarkable things he was doing, and the children shouting, "Hosanna to the son of David!" they were very angry.**

The king was fulfilling the words of the prophets. He came in humility. And he came announcing that he really was going to set the world to rights. He was going to set the world to rights in a way that would make the temple obsolete. Jesus himself would bridge the gulf between God and sinful humans. Jesus would offer himself as the once-for-all and perfect sacrifice for sin, a sacrifice that would finally purify his people so that in the Spirit, the living God could dwell within them and make them his temple. So that he could finally give them new hearts full of love for him and love for each other. They didn't want to hear that. It was his preaching about the temple that got him arrested.

Our long Palm Sunday Gospel today—Matthew 27—vividly depicts the Messiah's humble way to his throne. Betrayed by his friends, rejected by his people. Standing humbly before the Roman governor so many people expected him to slay. Facing trumped up charges made by lying men. Left condemned to death as the people chose instead that Pilate should free a brutal, violent revolutionary—a man truly guilty of the trumped up charges against Jesus. Standing humbly as the very people he came to save cried out to Pilate, "Crucify him!" Standing humbly as he, the king, was rejected by his own people who cried out the unthinkable, "We have no king but Caesar!" Standing humbly as Roman soldiers mocked him, beat him senseless and scourged him, ripping the skin from his body. Humbly dragging the very cross on which he would be crucified through the city. The king, nailed to a cross and hoisted to die between two violent thieves as his own people shouted blasphemies at him, as the chief priests and scribes mocked him shouting, "He rescued others, but he cannot rescue himself. If he's the king of Israel, let him come down from the cross! He trusts in God; let God deliver him now if he's really God's son!"

For hours Jesus suffered: pulling on those nails driven through his wrists, pushing on the nails driven through his feet, lifting himself to gasp for breath through the pain, while the people gathered around: Jews, Romans, even the spiritual shepherds of his people who claimed to speak for God mocked him and shouted blasphemies. And despite all that, Luke writes that Jesus prayed for them: **Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.** And eventually his body could take no more and Jesus breathed his last breath. Matthew says, the earth shook. The great veil that guarded the holy of holies in the temple was torn in two. And the Roman centurions standing guard, scared out of their wits, announced the very thing Jesus' own people would not: **He really was the son of God!**

Brothers and Sisters, there can be no Easter without Good Friday. To set the world to rights—to *really* set it to rights—not just to take a throne, not just to defeat the Romans—but to defeat sin and death and to reconcile sinful men and women to God required a king willing to let evil rise up to its full height, to let evil concentrate itself all in one place, and to let it do its worst, crashing down on him all at once. It required a king willing to throw himself into the gears of this fallen, broken, and sinful world to bring them to a stop. It required a king willing to give his life for his own people even as they mocked and blasphemed him, so that he could rise from that humiliating death to overturn the verdict against him, rise victorious over sin and death and the absolute worst that they could do. Only that humble king could defeat death and bring life—real and true life—back to God's creation and gather a people forgiven, cleansed by his blood, and filled with his Spirit to become a new temple, a new holy of holies where the nations would—where the nations *now*—enter the presence of God.

It was in that humble king that those Roman centurions saw something they had never seen before. Their Caesar called himself the son of God, but in Jesus they saw the God of Israel at work in all his glory, in all his love, in all his mercy, in all his faithfulness—like no god they'd ever known—completely unlike any god or goddess honoured in the Pantheon. Whether they knew it or not, those centurions that first Good Friday announced the defeat of Jupiter and Mars, of Hera and Diana, of Neptune and Vesta and all the others. And they announced the defeat of Caesar, too. In less than three centuries, the Emperor of Rome himself would be captivated by the good news about Jesus, the son of God, the great King who was setting the world to rights.

But Brothers and Sisters, the good news about Jesus, crucified and risen, didn't go out through the empire and to the nations all on its own. It was carried, it was *stewarded* by a people—by a church—that, itself, took on the humility of the Saviour. The bones of those martyrs buried in the Pantheon are a testimony to the faithful, humble, sacrificial witness of Jesus' people in those early centuries. They didn't just proclaim a message. They lived it out as a community—as the vanguard of God's new creation born that first Easter morning. A people welling over with the humility of Jesus and the love of the Spirit. In the midst of a world of darkness, of false gods and idolatry, of brutality and immorality hard for us to imagine today, they gave the pagans a glimpse of God's future. By the way they lived, they lifted the veil and showed the world God's new creation. It was not only the proclamation of the church, but the very life of the church that showed the world a better way, a way no one before had ever known.

Here's the truth of it: The people of the humble king must be humble too or it's all for nought. This is why Paul, writing to the Philippians, says to them, **If our shared life in the king**

brings any comfort; if love still has the power to make you cheerful; if we really do have a partnership in the Spirit; if your hearts are at all moved with affection and sympathy—then make my joy complete! Bring your thinking into line with one another. In other words, if you're going to be a gospel community for all the world to see: ***Have this mind amongst yourselves! Here's how to do it. Hold on to the same love; bring your innermost lives into harmony; fix your minds on the same object. Never act out of selfish ambition or vanity; instead, regard everyone else as your superior. Look after each other's best interests, not your own.***

And I can hear them asking Paul, “But how? It seems impossible to be that kind of people.” And Paul knew that, too. And so he takes them back to the cross. Brothers and Sisters, everything goes back to Jesus and the cross! The cross is the only way a gospel people can be a gospel people. He writes: **This is how you should think amongst yourselves, with the mind that you have because you belong to Jesus the Messiah.** And what does that look like? Paul quotes what looks like song lyrics—maybe a hymn they sang regularly in their churches—a hymn full of gospel truth that maybe they'd got just a little too used to over the years, truth they needed to be reminded of, to think through, to incorporate into their own lives. Paul writes:

Who, though in God's form, did not regard his equality with God as something he ought to exploit. Instead, he emptied himself, and received the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men. And then, having human appearance, he humbled himself, and became obedient even to death, yes, even death on a cross. And so God has greatly exalted him, and to him in his favour has given the name which is over all names. That now at the name of Jesus every knee within

heaven shall bow—on earth, too, and under the earth. And every tongue shall confess that Messiah Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Paul reminds them of the humble king, the son of God who not only took on our flesh, but who gave his life in the most painful and humiliating way possible so that on his way to his throne he might take us with him.

Brothers and Sisters, the only way we will ever be faithful in being the people Jesus has called us to be, the only way we will ever be faithful in being the new creation people the Spirit has made us, the only way will ever be faithful stewards of the gospel is to keep the cross of Jesus always before us. There's a reason why we confess our sins before we come to the Lord's Table. There is a reason that we repeatedly recall our unworthiness to enter the presence of God on our own merit. There is a reason why, as we rise in the morning and as we go to bed at night, we confess our sins. It's so that as we hear the absolution and as we come to the Table, we will remember just how gracious and merciful and loving God has been to us. It's why we sing songs like “Amazing Grace”. Amazing grace is such a sweet, sweet sounds, because apart from grace we are such sinful wretches. And it is inevitable that when we forget this, when we start to think of ourselves as deserving of the gifts God has poured out on us, when we forget the sinfulness of our sin, when we forget that we are the ones who have broken his beloved creation, dear Friends, that's when we forget the true power of the gospel and the true mercy of the cross and the great depth of the love of God for sinners. When we forget the sinfulness of our sin, we lose sight of the amazingness of God's grace. Eventually we lose the mind of Jesus the Messiah and we cease to be the community of humble servants that he has made us. We turn, instead, to self-righteousness, to pride, to violence, to politics, to money, to

power to further the kingdom of God.
And our light grows dim. Our witness
fails.

We see it happening all around us in
the West. We've stopped talking
about sin and we've thought more
highly of ourselves than we ought.
We preach a doctrine of cheap grace.
And our light has gone dim. Our
churches have emptied and the culture
has claimed them for its own. In some
they preach false gospels of prosperity
or the divinity of man or the goodness
of sexual immorality. We setup idols
to politics and earthly power in them.
Some are literally gutted, becoming
theatres or bars. Others are little more
than tourist attractions: testimonies to
the power of the gospel in the days we
proclaimed it, but now empty, dead
shells. The culture removes the cross
and sets up altars to its idols. Brothers
and Sisters, before it is too late, let us
kneel before the cross of Jesus and
look up. Let it fill our vision. Let us
remember that he—the sinless son of
God—died the death we deserve. And
let us meditate on the depth and power
of his grace that we might share the
humble mind of our humble king, that
we might be the people he has called
us to be, the people he has given his
Spirit to make us, the people who will
steward his gospel of grace until every
knee bows and every tongues
confesses that Jesus the Messiah is
Lord and gives glory to God the
Father.

Let's 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.*