

Sermon: the Lord has come to his temple

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

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On his donkey, Jesus rode from Bethany to Jerusalem. People waved palmbranches, as we did this morning. They welcomed Jesus to enter into Jerusalem.

When Jesus came at the top of the mount of olives and just went over it, he saw the whole city down there, with the enormous temple right in front of him.

He only had to go down the mount of olives, into the Kidron Valley, to arrive at the city gate that was called the Eastern Gate; this gate in the city wall was at the same time the gate of the Jewish temple complex.

1 Through the gates

Psalm 118 contains many elements of this journey of Jesus; the church has always seen this Psalm as a prophecy about Jesus Christ. So let us follow Jesus on his journey and look at the Psalm at the same time.

Our Lord entered through the city gate, as the Psalm says,

Open for me the gates of righteousness;
I will enter them; I will offer thanks to the Lord.
"This is the gate of the Lord
he who is righteous may enter." (Ps 118:19-20)

In our life we have many doors in front of us; many choices to make; many gates to go through. What gate do we enter into? Where do we go? What choices do we make in life? May we always chose the gate of the righteous, to move closer to our Lord, and not away from Him. Even if those choices may sometimes hurt us for a while.

Jesus had to make his own choices, and he knew - if I now enter into the city, my fate is sealed. He knew his life would end just days later.

But He decided to enter into the Gate of Righteousness.

when Jesus stood on the top of the Mount of Olives he could look over this Eastern Gate into the huge temple area and see all the temple gates in a perfect line: first the Eastern Gate, then in a straight line the Gate of the Outer Court of the Temple - the area where gentiles could

come to pray, then the Inner Court Gate, for the Jewish people, and finally the actual entrance into the Temple where only the priests could enter.

Many Jews believe even today, that the Messiah will one day enter into Jerusalem from the east through this Eastern Gate. So for many Jews, the gate, even today, has a special holiness.

It is interesting that this gate is the only one of the eight gates in Jerusalem today that is sealed. In the year 1530 the Ottoman Turks walled the gate up with great stones, and they placed a Muslim cemetery in front of the gate, thinking that the Jewish Messiah could not set foot in a cemetery and therefore he would not be able to come.

This should not bother us. They were 15 centuries late with their trick. As Christians we believe that the Messiah has already gone through the gate. That feast we celebrate today. The beginning of Holy Week.

Jesus entered into Jerusalem just like all other pilgrims, and in this way, he also stood in unison with all people who look for peace with God. Jesus came as a pilgrim - even though He was the Lord of the Temple.

But he did not consider being God something to hold unto; He became a human being - he became like one of us - in order to fulfill the plans of God.

The Psalm says that the righteous may enter through the Gate. That meant originally, that anyone belonging to the people of God, seeking to live a righteous life, could enter into the temple to worship God.

When Jesus entered through the Gate, the term 'He who is righteous may enter' received a much deeper meaning. He is the one who served God perfectly well, who had done no evil.

Paul, the apostle, wrote later that no human being is righteous; Jesus Christ alone. In fact, only He, because of his holiness, has the right to enter into the presence of God, but when he did, after his crucifixion and resurrection, he, the only Righteous one, took us with him in his slipstream.

He has made us part of himself because we believe in him. We are allowed to enter into God's Gates and be with God.

2 Procession with branches to the altar

The pilgrims surrounding Jesus had picked up palm branches, joyfully celebrating Jesus on his way to the Temple. Were they reminded of Psalm 118? That Psalm was sung during that whole week in the temple, as part of the normal festal liturgy.

Most people knew very well the words from the Psalm that said:

God is the Lord; he has shined upon us;
form a procession with branches up to the horns of the altar.

And that is what the people did. They went in procession with Jesus all the way down the mount of olives, through the Kidron Valley, and through the Eastern Gate into the temple area.

That is really the message of Palm Sunday. The waving of the palms was festive - but the direction was to the altar. For the people even the altar was a matter of feasting - that is where God donated forgiveness. For Jesus this was less than festive. He came to donate himself.

Jesus came into Jerusalem and looked straight at the area where the animal sacrifices for the altar were slaughtered. Because he came to be the ultimate sacrifice - the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

That was surely not what the people surrounding Jesus envisioned. His own disciples knew that Jesus kept talking about his coming death. But what did this mean? And the idea that he would voluntarily sacrifice his life for the sake of serving and honoring God, that was totally impossible to understand.

The masses had an easier message. They wanted salvation, to be saved from their enemies. And here was Jesus, who had just days before, raised Lazarus from the dead. He can heal people. He can do miracles. The city was abuzz with gossip. This is the man who will save us! He is our liberator.

So, they shouted lines from the Psalm:

"Hosanna! " "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Blessed is the king of Israel!"

3 Stone rejected by builders

The masses expected victory. The King of Israel was in their midst. He would beat the Romans out, he would take firm action. The one who raises people from the dead would certainly be able to gather the people for strong action to liberate the land and inaugurate his rule over the land.

But their Jewish leaders had very different plans. They wanted to do away with Jesus as he endangered their political and religious positions. They did not want the Romans to think that an uprising was brewing - imagine, that could cost them their position!

So they rejected Jesus; they rejected his views of God; they did not want Jesus to be their king.

And we know the story; the same people, the masses who shouted hosanna and who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem, the same people were easily enticed to shout crucify him a few days later.

“The same stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone”, Psalm 118 says.

The builders are the leaders of Israel - the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Herodians, all people with power and influence who said no to Jesus. And like blind sheep, the people followed.

“If Jesus does not give us what we want, then we do not want him at all”, was their attitude.

Today, we must also be careful that we do not construct a Jesus who gives us all we want in our mind. Jesus did not promise us golden mountains on earth; but so many people think that he is a sort of divine santa. We must be careful that we do not expect things from him that he never promised, and then become disappointed and reject him - just because he does not conform to our desires.

If we truly believe and hope that someone can help us, and he then does not do it, our love for someone may easily change into hatred and rejection.

Nothing can be as venomous as a disappointed man or woman. Our hearts can be so hateful and devious.

And Jesus, knowing what is in our human heart, he saw the altar at the end of his road down the mountain of olives. He looked at all those who shouted hosanna and waved palm branches, and knew what was to come. Crucifixion.

Jesus also knew that the stone that the builders rejected would become the cornerstone of God's new temple. Yes, of a new temple.

He entered the temple area on his donkey, he went through the Gate of the Outer Court, and there he overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves.

He was angered because the area of the temple that was reserved for the nations to pray to God, was used for business so that the nations practically had no place, no chance to quietly pray to God.

And a few days after his entry into Jerusalem, Jesus explained to his disciples that all of Jerusalem and the Temple would be totally destroyed.

But he would be the cornerstone of a new temple. Two months later, Peter preached in Jerusalem that "There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12)

The apostle Paul wrote later, to the Ephesians, that Christ is the cornerstone of the people of God "in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord" (Eph 2:21) People from all nations worship Christ together in God's new temple - the community of the people of God.

So eventually the people did understand that Jesus and his death and resurrection were truly the mercy of God, in accordance with Psalm 118: "Give thanks to the Lord for He is good; his mercy endures forever".

Jesus himself is the mercy of God to his people and to the whole world. God's mercy became visible in how God became man - in baby Jesus. It became visible in the life of Jesus.

And now, as Jesus on his donkey descends to Jerusalem, we see the mercy of God. He himself decided to enter through the gate. Now there is no going back. The road of Jesus leads to the altar. What we now call Holy Week has begun.

Amen