

JOY, SADNESS, & JOY

An Easter Sermon by the Rev. Patrick A. Rose

“Therefore you now have sorrow; but I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you” (John 016:22).

The story of the Lord’s last days on earth is one of joy, then of grief, and then again of joy. On Palm Sunday He rode, triumphant, into Jerusalem and was hailed by a multitude of people. Joyful shouts of “Hosanna” filled the air, and people spread their garments and branches of palm trees in the road. So great were the numbers of people who thronged around the Lord, welcoming Him as their King, that the Pharisees, who had been plotting against Him, said among themselves, “You see that you are accomplishing nothing. Look, the world has gone after Him!” (John 12:19).

In sharp contrast to this, are the events which happened four to five days later. Once again there was a multitude of people. This multitude, though, did not welcome the Lord. Instead, when Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, asked what was to be done with Jesus, they cried out, “Let Him be crucified!” (Matthew 27:22). And, at the end, when the Lord cried with a loud voice, “Father, into Your hands I commend My spirit” (Luke 23:46), the grief and despair felt by the disciples must have been almost unbearable.

His disciples, you see, had followed Him and been taught by Him as He traveled throughout the land. Only a short while before, He had ridden into Jerusalem as a King and had been welcomed as a King. Now it appeared as if all were lost. To the disciples it appeared as if the Messiah, the Christ, was dead. We are told that at the time of the crucifixion there was darkness over the whole earth. From noon till three in the afternoon, the sky was black. Surely, there must have been an even greater blackness in the hearts of those who had loved and followed the Lord.

Two days later, though, they learned the happy news! First there was a feeling of disbelief. The Lord *had* promised that He would rise again on the third day. But they had not really believed that He would rise again, not until now. Now, though, the evidence was irrefutable. The Lord had risen as He said. Once again He stood before His disciples. And they were happy!

This cycle—from joy, to grief and despair, and then once again to happiness—is a universal pattern. It occurs so often throughout life, in both the big and the little things. Take the overall cycle of life, for example. For most people their childhood is a time of happiness. Unhappiness, frustration and despair occur only later, when they face the problems of life as an adult. Then, as they face up to and live through whatever troubles life may bring, they often find a sense of peace that comes only with the wisdom of experience in their later years,. The cycle can also be seen within marriage. The experience of falling in love, being betrothed, and getting married, has, quite rightly, been described as heaven on earth. Once married, though, this state does not continue indefinitely. Friction, disagreement, and even doubt and despair, replace the original love and romance. Yet, where there is perseverance, where there is a regard for the sanctity of marriage, and where there is true charity and consideration toward one other, then love and friendship do not die, but are strengthened and deepened in the romance of old age.

We also see this universal cycle in the smaller concerns of life. As we undertake some new project, our initial joy and enthusiasm can grow dim, as problems stand in the way of our goal. But as we progress and finally succeed, previous frustrations are forgotten in the satisfaction of accomplishment.

It is not surprising that this general pattern is seen in so many areas of human existence, because the affairs of this world are but a reflection of the realm of the spirit. This cycle from joy to despair, and once again to joy, can be seen so often in this world, because it is the cycle of spiritual growth. The way in which we progress in various areas of life is a reflection of the general way in which our spiritual life progresses.

As we read and reflect upon the events which occurred in the last period of the Lord's life on earth, it is important that we do not regard them only as historical incidents. Like all the things recorded in the Word, they represent and portray the way in which every person can gradually be conjoined to the Lord. It was the Lord's will that, on a deeper level, His life on earth might show that path which all must follow if they are to be conjoined to Him.

So it is that on our own way to heaven there must first be a time when the Lord, as it were, rides triumphantly into our minds, as He rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Later, there will come a time when it seems as if the Lord is absent. He will appear to have left us. As the disciples grieved when it appeared that the Messiah had been killed, so, too, we will despair when for a time our lives appear devoid of the Lord's presence. In the end, though, the Lord *will* return. If we persevere, eventually the darkness will end, and, once again, He will rise within our minds, bringing joy, and peace, and happiness.

The story of Palm Sunday begins as the Lord traveled from Jericho to Jerusalem. As He traveled away from Jericho, two blind men called out and asked for mercy, begging the Lord to heal their blindness. The Lord touched their eyes, restoring their sight. Now just as these men received their vision from the Lord, so, too, the path of regeneration begins with a vision. We come to a turning point in our lives where we see that a concern for this world alone will never bring us happiness. We realize that eternal happiness will come only if we look to the Lord and follow His teachings. We resolve that from that point on we will not blindly follow our own desires, but will let the Lord and His commandments rule our lives. He will be our Ruler; He will be our King! And it is as our King that we welcome the Lord into our minds. This first state, which might be described as one of spiritual idealism, is characterized primarily by obedience and joy.

As the Lord came toward Jerusalem, He was riding upon a donkey's colt. This, all the people knew, was the sign of a king, riding toward his coronation. As they rushed forward to greet the Lord, their King—a king they thought would rescue them from the hated government of the Romans—they brought branches of palm trees.

In the Word, palm trees represent the good of truth. Now the good of truth is the good we perform when we do what the Lord teaches us to be true. This is the kind of good done by someone just beginning the process of regeneration. Such a person may not always *feel* like doing what is good. But, still, he places his trust in Divine Revelation. He relies upon Divine Revelation to guide him and to teach him what is good. And, most importantly, he then does what the Lord's truth teaches—he does the good of truth. This is what the palms stand for.

The palms with which people greeted the Lord also mean something else. From ancient times people who were celebrating, who were joyful, would carry palm branches in their hands. The huge crowd of people who greeted the Lord with palm branches as He rode into Jerusalem were following this ancient custom in expressing the happiness that was in their hearts. We too feel happiness as we start to follow the Lord. We see the beauty of the Word. We have faith that by following the Lord's teachings, we will eventually come into the happiness of heaven itself. And so we set off along the path of regeneration with joy in our hearts, carrying, as it were, spiritual palms in our hands.

There is, however, no such thing as instant regeneration. On this point the Heavenly Doctrines of the New Church are very emphatic. They say that, "It is an error of the present age to believe that the state of a person's life can be changed in a moment" (*Divine Providence* 279:4). Though somebody might, in a moment, *resolve* to turn away from what is evil, his actual desire to commit evil can be removed by the Lord only gradually. For if the Lord were to suddenly change a person, it would destroy him. It can only be a gradual process, for the human spirit is organic. It can grow only gradually. This is why it is that initial joy gives way, inevitably, to temptation. Even as one part of us wishes so much to obey the Lord, another part still enjoys doing things that are wrong. What is more, our desire to follow the Lord is attacked by the hells through our tendency to enjoy what is evil. Evil desires, selfish enjoyments, rise up and attack us. They try to completely destroy our love for what is good and true, just as those who hated the Lord while He was on earth tried to destroy Him through crucifixion. We want to follow the Lord, but we are torn by a desire to turn away from Him. In spiritual temptation we suffer internal pain, grief, despair, and hopelessness. We find ourselves bearing a cross, as the Lord Himself did, and as He promised that we also would. "And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me" (Matthew 10:38).

Even though the suffering of spiritual temptation is as nothing compared to the suffering the Lord Himself endured, to us the pain can seem almost unbearable. Spiritual suffering can feel like hell itself. To add to our suffering, it can seem as if we are left to ourselves, with no help from the Lord. We feel as lost as the disciples did when they saw the Lord being led to His crucifixion. And we cry out for inner strength from the Lord. "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46). This was the Lord's cry upon the cross, as He cried out for Divine strength from the Divine soul within Himself. It is our cry as well. In temptation we can seem forsaken by the Lord.

Yet it is then, in our darkest moment, that the Lord is most closely present. Unbeknownst to us, He is gently watching over us. He is there, with help, waiting. It is true that we are suspended between heaven and hell, between a desire to do what is good and a desire to do what is evil. This, though, is so that we may truly choose between the two. In temptation we experience the illusion that the Lord is far away—but it is only an illusion, something that is allowed so that in our loneliness we might cry out for His presence from the bottom of our hearts. This loneliness sometimes lasts for quite a while. It was not until the third day that the Lord arose from the sepulcher to comfort His disciples. The third day represents a completed state, which, in matters of the spirit, cannot be measured in hours, days, even years. Some people may suffer temptations for a long while, especially if they had previously indulged in evil with no restraint. But for all who persevere, the agony of decision will eventually pass, as will our lonely cry for the Lord's presence and help. Once we have chosen to reject the ways of evil and selfishness, and persevered along the path of righteousness, the Lord will, in the end, rise again within our hearts.

The Lord's resurrection involves so many things. By rising from sepulcher, He proclaimed the truth that He is God Himself. By conquering death, He showed that He has power over death and that He has the power to give us eternal life beyond the grave. By rising again on that first Easter morning, He also symbolized the dawning of a new era, with a new church. The Lord established the Christian Church, a church which would, for a time, bring light and love to those who had been in ignorance for so long. But the Lord, in rising from the sepulcher, also showed something else.

When the Lord rose from the sepulcher, He showed that He has power to rise from another sepulcher also. We all have such a sepulcher within our minds. We all have memories of past sins, evils committed and duties left undone. When we are in the midst of temptation, these memories can haunt us. We seem to see our hope of salvation buried beneath the debris of past evils. What we have done in the past will, we imagine, condemn us to a future in hell. And so, as we struggle to resist evil, we at times almost give up hope. We look at our past and think that we are evil and that we always will be. But while we still live on this earth, what we have done in the past is not what we will necessarily become. There is no need to focus forever upon the past. The past is dead. The Lord, and His salvation, does not lie buried forever under sins we have committed in the past. As the angels asked those who came to the sepulcher early in the morning, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" (Luke 24:5). The Lord's salvation is not lost in the past. It lies in the future, in our future, if we but follow Him along the pathway to heaven. All we need to do is change our ways, and turn to Him.

The Lord will rise again in our hearts. When the night is over, morning will come, as the Lord brings spiritual light. And then the Lord will no longer seem absent, for we will have trust in His presence, and His many blessings will seem so obvious, so apparent. Deep within, we will feel a sense of peace. Once again there will be joy and happiness. The Lord has *RISEN!* And then our happiness will be eternal.

This can happen to us. When we feel despair in trying to live a life of good, when our Lord seems far—so far—away, let us not forget that He will rise again and come to us, as He came to His disciples. The Lord had promised that He would come again to His disciples and bring them joy. And this promise, this promise of joy, is a promise for all who trust in the Lord and abide in His ways. It is a promise for all of us, today.

I say to you that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; and you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy.... Therefore you now have sorrow; but I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you.... Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full (John 16:20, 22, 24).

Amen.

Lessons: Matthew 20:29-34, 21:1-11; Luke 24:1-9, 33-43; *True Christian Religion* 105

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