

The Reasons for Palm Sunday

by the Rev. James P. Cooper

When they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, [they] took branches of palm trees and went out to meet Him, and cried out: "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! The King of Israel!" (John 12:12-13).

For two thousand years, the prophets had promised the children of Israel that the Messiah would come to save them. Jehovah had established a covenant with Abraham that if he and his family would worship Jehovah, then Jehovah would make him the father of a great nation. The Historical books of the Old Testament tell the story of how Jehovah fulfilled His promise to Abraham; how through Isaac, Jacob and Jacob's twelve sons they became a great nation; and how through Moses and Joshua He gave them their own land to rule. Under David they reached their spiritual height, and under Solomon they achieved their greatest wealth.

The Prophetic books of the Old Testament describe how easily the children of Israel fell into disobedience, how they continually turned away from Jehovah to worship idols, and how He allowed the other nations to punish them for their sins. And when they were being punished, when they were in slavery to the nations, Jehovah sent prophets to give them a message of hope. He promised a savior, a Messiah, to come to lift them up once again, to save them from their oppression, to return them to the days of power and glory like those when David and Solomon ruled.

The dream of the coming of the Messiah burned in the heart of every true son and daughter of Abraham, for it meant freedom from their oppressors, and the righting of ancient wrongs. The coming of the Messiah meant (as they understood it) that they would finally be restored to their rightful position as rulers over the nations of the world, fulfilling the original promise made to Abraham and reaffirmed so many times to his descendants.

And then, at a time in history when what was left of the Jewish nation was chafing under the total control of the rich, powerful, and idolatrous Romans, there began to be rumors of a particularly powerful prophet. We must remember that even though Israel is a small nation, news still traveled very slowly in those days. Very few people living at the time of the Lord's ministry would have known much about Him at first. Of course, this was part of the reason He spent three years traveling around Israel, so that as many people as possible could hear His teachings for themselves. He spoke as a prophet. He did miracles, healing the sick, raising the dead.

The name "Christ" itself meant "the Anointed One," "the King," "the Messiah." What else were a simple, uninformed, and enslaved people to think, except that the Lord had come to use His great power to drive the Romans out and become the ruler of the New Kingdom of Israel? What else could all those parables about the heavenly kingdom be but a promise of the kind of life they would expect when the Messiah was king? After all, nothing in the Old Testament or in Jewish tradition had prepared them for the idea of a life after death, so for them there could be no other idea of a kingdom for the Messiah than an earthly one. Both the Gospels and the Heavenly Doctrines tell us that even the disciples themselves didn't really begin to understand the nature of

the Lord's Divinity until He appeared to them after the Resurrection, and then the concept of a life after death began to dawn in them (see *Arcana Coelestia* 2553).

So why did the Lord let them continue to believe in a false idea? Why didn't He tell them in plain words who He was and what He was about? Because they simply would not have believed Him if He had told them about heaven in plain words. It would be like trying to explain a nuclear power station to a five year old child. You might be able to do it, using only the few simple words in the child's vocabulary, but the idea would not get through; there would be no foundation of concepts to build on.

During His earthly ministry, the Lord was laying the foundation for all those people who would come after. Everything He did in the world was for the sake of correspondences. He rode into Jerusalem that day so many years ago not because He wanted those people to believe that He was going to be their earthly king, but so that we would know that He is to be our spiritual king. He was doing things so that we could use the internal sense to understand His mission and life on earth more deeply and more fully than even His own disciples did.

Now, remembering that everything He did was for the sake of the spiritual sense, and so that all people might know about His Divinity and His Heavenly Kingdom, let us look at some of the things the Lord did on that Palm Sunday to teach us about Himself and Heaven.

Our text tells us that when the multitude saw the Lord approaching Jerusalem, they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet Him and cried out "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! The King of Israel!" (John 12:13). "Hosanna" means "save, we pray you!", and it only occurs five times in scripture, all in conjunction with Palm Sunday. The Heavenly Doctrines teach that "the children's crying 'Hosanna to the son of David' was to represent that only innocence acknowledges and receives the Lord, that is, they in whom there is innocence" (*Arcana Coelestia* 52364). So, by derivation, Hosanna means the acknowledgment and reception of the Lord by those who are innocent through repentance and amendment of life.

Even though many people thought of Him as a teacher (or Rabbi) or as a prophet, yet, as He approached the city, they all called Him "Lord." We are told that

*Among the hidden causes of their calling Jehovah "the Lord," were the following: If at that time it had been said that the Lord was the Jehovah so often named in the Old testament..., people would not have accepted it, for they would not have believed it; and moreover the Lord did not become Jehovah as to the Human also until He had completely united the Divine Essence to the Human Essence, and the Human to the Divine.... The full union was accomplished after the last temptation, which was that of the cross.... He is called "Christ" as the Messiah, the Anointed, King; and "Lord" as Jehovah; "Christ" in respect to truth, and "Lord" in respect to good (*Arcana Coelestia* 2921:6).*

The number goes on to say that many who have not studied the Word closely believe that Jesus was called "Lord" by His disciples and others out of common reverence. But this is not the case.

He is called “Lord” for the sake of the internal sense known to the angels, for when He was “Lord” it signified the acknowledgment that He was actually Jehovah Himself.

The Heavenly Doctrines of the New Church explain many of the correspondences of the Lord’s actions on earth, as in the following two passages.

The Lord was willing to be tempted, even to the passion of the cross, because He was the essential Prophet; and the prophets formerly signified the doctrine of the church from the Word, and therefore the state of the Church was represented by them in various ways, some of which were unjust, grievous, and abominable, and these representations were enjoined upon them by God. But because the Lord was the Word itself, He, as the essential Prophet, represented in the passion of the cross the Jewish Church in its ways of profaning the Word (True Christian Religion 129).

By the disciples putting their garments on the ass and her colt, was represented that truths in the whole complex were submitted to the Lord as the Highest Judge and King; for the disciples represented the church of the Lord in respect to its truths and goods... and their garments represented the truths themselves.... The same thing was represented by the multitude strewing their garments in the way, and also branches of trees. The reason why they strewed them in the way was that by “a way” is signified the truth whereby the person of the church is led.... The reason why they strewed branches of trees, was that trees signified the perceptions and also the knowledges of truth and good..., consequently “the branches” denote the truths themselves. This was done also in conformity with a customary rite; for when the highest judges and kings rode in their solemn procession, the princes of the people then put their garments on the asses and mules, and the people themselves strewed their garments on the way, or in their place the branches of trees; for the judicial function in heaven is the Divine truth from the Divine good, and the regal one is the Divine truth (Arcana Coelestia 9212:6).

As we can see, everything the Lord did while He was in the world was done for many reasons on many levels. He did things for the sake of those who were with Him in the world—those who believed that He was the promised earthly Messiah—to lead them to a new understanding of their world. He also did them for the sake of what the gospels would record and what the people who came after the disciples would be able to learn from the record, knowing, as they did, that He was not just a man or a prophet in the usual sense. Those who were to form the Christian Church would be able to build from a knowledge and confidence that there was a life after death. These people could look back on all the things that Jesus taught and, seeing them from the totally new perspective of the resurrection, build the first coherent doctrine concerning spiritual life as a reward for obedience to God’s laws in this world.

The Lord also did all these things for the sake of the internal sense which was written for the angels in heaven, and for those people who have the science of correspondences. By entering

Jerusalem as a king, He showed all people for all time, who seek to truly understand Him, that He was not just an influential man, not just a prophet, but actually God with us!

What is our part in this? It is for us to see that Jerusalem, because it is a city, represents our mind. The Lord approaching Jerusalem stands for the fact that the Lord is constantly approaching us through His influx, constantly reaching out to us. It remains for us to decide how we are going to respond to His approach. Will we lay palms in the way? Will we put our garments in His path? To do this is to say that we will submit our lives' material and natural pleasures to His Divine rule. Will we receive Him with joy and gladness? Will we accept Him as our God and King? Will we accept Him for a while, but, when hard times come and He doesn't respond to our prayers as we think He should, will we turn on Him and shout for His crucifixion?

The Lord has done His part by offering Himself to us as the king of our lives. Now it is up to us to decide if we are willing to give up our natural, worldly values and happiness and replace them with the eternal values and eternal happiness that will come if we receive the Lord as our king. He is making this offer to each of us, today, this moment. Each of us must search our hearts and minds for the answer. It is up to us. No one will make these decisions for us. The few days between Palm Sunday and Good Friday would be a good time to reflect deeply and honestly about how we receive the Lord in our own lives, and how His presence with us is shown by the things we do to the people around us. "When they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, [they] took branches of palm trees and went out to meet Him, and cried out 'Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! The King of Israel!'" (John 12:12-13).

Amen.

Lessons: Psalm 118:19-26; John 12:12-19; *Arcana Coelestia* 2921:6