

Homecoming  
John 12:12-19  
March 25, 2018  
Palm Sunday

Dear Friends in Christ,

There's a high school tradition down in the United States that is common to many high schools. No matter how big or small the high school is, there is a football team of some size. The last home game of the season is called homecoming. They always have a bonfire on Thursday night, a homecoming football game on Friday night, and on Saturday there's a big dance. A lucky boy and girl always get elected to be the king and queen, with all the pageantry and local traditions observed. Before the dance, there's the homecoming parade. It always helps if the home team wins the homecoming game. If they lose, it takes excitement out of the weekend.

I think about this homecoming as I read the story of Jesus and his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Although he was born in Bethlehem, and grew up in distant Nazareth, Jerusalem was really his home city. Since the time of King David, some 900 years previous, Jerusalem was the hometown of the kings of Israel. During Jesus' time there was no real king. Tiberius Caesar of Rome had control of Palestine, and he allowed Herod to wear the title of king while his prefect, Pontius Pilate, had charge all the important matters of state.

So here comes Jesus into Jerusalem, riding through the streets as if he were king David coming home after a great battle or something. Only instead of a convertible he is riding a little donkey, instead of cheerleaders and bands playing they wave palm branches and children are singing. And in the city of David all Jesus' enemies have gathered to have at him one last time. It appears that he is going to lose his last homecoming game.

What are we to make of this scene? We might ask if he's really a king like David, why doesn't he show a little more of his royalty? The movie stars of today know how to put on a show at the Oscars, don't they? Fabulous clothing, hairdos, fine automobiles, a big audience applauds them, the theme from their movie is played as they step onto the stage. Cable TV plays the scene around the world. It's all about them and what they've done.

Then there's Jesus. Not much of a star. Rides in on a donkey, trailed by a mob of dirty children and ragged disciples. Can this be the king of the world? As they say of many small towns, "Don't blink or you'll miss it." Not very impressive.

The emphasis in the Bible is not so much on how Jesus comes into Jerusalem for the last time, but what he's coming to do. There on its streets he will retrace his steps on Friday, not carried by a donkey, but carrying the cross, instrument of his own torture and death. In Jerusalem Jesus will offer up to God his Heavenly Father the sacrifice of his life for all for the sin of the world.

The people themselves predicted this when they said, "Hosanna!" which means, "save us now." Have you ever considered how strange it is that the city would welcome Jesus on Sunday with the words, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord," and just five days later condemn him with the words, "crucify him!"?

We say to ourselves, how fickle you are, Jerusalem. You ask someone to save you, and then you kill him. How much more enlightened we are today. We would never do that to you if you came in the present time. That's probably true. Things being the way they are today, if Jesus wanted to come and save us we'd probably ask him to leave before he offended anyone of a different faith.

We are just as fickle as Jerusalem because we suffer the same symptoms. We are sinners. After all, we are the ones who pray the words, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done," and then we go off to do things our own way anyhow. We are the ones who look at the cross up here week after week, praying to the one who died there for us, and do not give ourselves to those around us in need. We praise God for forgiving us a lifetime of sin, but we have such a hard time forgiving others. We are just as fickle as Jerusalem was, are we not?

This week is Holy Week. Again we consider the sufferings of Christ. So behold, Jerusalem, behold the grief of your Lord as he goes to the cross. To the world it appears that he will lose, but the faithful see the victory in it. When we meditate on the sufferings of the Lord, we feel the love of God and the patience he has with us. He bends his head to kiss us. He opens his arms to embrace us. He opens his hands to give us gifts. He opens his side so that we can see his heart glowing with love for us. He is lifted up from the earth so that he can draw us all to himself. His wounds are alive with grief, yet gleaming with love. In those open wounds we must seek the secret of his heart. Out of his veins flows the blood of our redemption.

As a bunch of grapes is put into a winepress and crushed by the weight placed on it, and from every side it pours out its juice, so the body of Jesus, crushed by the weight of God's wrath on the severity of our sins, pours out on all sides its precious life blood. That is what Jesus is going into Jerusalem to do for us.

If we do not know what sin is and how greatly we are overcome with it, unable to help ourselves, we will not be able to understand why Jesus went through all this. But if we listen to the Law of God, and begin to see how far we have fallen from the kingdom of God, we can then praise and worship Jesus for pouring out his blood for us. He will then be our only true king, this poor man riding on a donkey, and we will be his true people.

It is no coincidence that at the celebration of the Lord's Supper we recite the words of Palm Sunday, singing, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest." Christ pours out that same blood he shed in Jerusalem into the cup to bring to us the forgiveness of sins.

That's the fuel the Holy Spirit pours into our lives so we can live the life that pleases our Lord every day. It powers our resolve to do what is right when everyone else around us may be doing the wrong. It gives us courage to say "no" when others want us to say "yes"; to keep God first in our lives where we will find true joy and peace and love.

The children had a good time this morning, didn't they? They walked down the aisle in the procession with big smiles, waving the palm branches. Is there anything wrong with that? Should we all go about with long faces, saying "It's holy week, what a burden!" Rather, we can be thankful that Jesus has gone into Jerusalem to pour out his life. For by this he has forgiven our debt to God and set us free. What looked like a losing game turned out to be the greatest victory ever! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.