

Palm Sunday | Matthew 21:1-11; Philippians 2:5-11 | LUMC | April 2nd, 2023

Dear Church family and friends: We just concluded week six of the season of Lent and are entering the passion week starting with Palm Sunday when Jesus entered Jerusalem to prepare for his death. It is important to remember that historical event which, starting on Palm Sunday, gave birth to the church. At the end of the Palm Sunday events, Jesus accepted the cross to save sinful souls. This self-sacrificing action remains as a powerful act of love that Jesus took to redeem us all. It is this action we have celebrated and continue to celebrate today. Jesus graciously offered to save us. Let us enter this festive season grieving of our inability to live up to the Word and our inability to practice the Word.

We have meditated through the Lenten season our weakness to live up to the teachings of Jesus, and we have repented and hope Jesus will reclaim us back to the cross. The readings today remind us that the soul continues sinning even after experiencing Jesus' agony and pleadings on the cross. But here is the thing: "The soul that sin shall surely die." The Prophet Hezekiah's warning is not to be taken lightly. Jesus continues in the line of Hezekiah, asking us to love God and obey God's teachings and worship "in truth and in spirit."

God created us to love God and one another. God created everything else for us to use. All that is around us—the air, the animals, the plants, mineral resources, and all the extras—were created and given freely for us to use. With time, humanity turned to love other created things more than God and other human beings. God continues to plead with humanity to reverse the course of exchanging love for things in vain. We tend to worship material things more than we worship God. We have forgotten about being gentle and modest, practicing humility and living the unassuming life. This is why Jesus today rode on a colt, a young innocent donkey to express humility and self-sacrifice. Jesus refused to ride on a mature donkey because he was heralding the birth of a new soul, a soul cleansed of sinful life, and a soul redeemed to live a gift of loving God and others more than material things.

Jesus rode a colt to herald the birth of a church, the church which will continue to live the teachings of the cross. Jesus could have chosen to ride a horse, the most popular animal used by the high-class people and the military at war. Instead, he used a colt, a most insignificant animal. He chose an animal mostly used by the common people to accomplish daily needs like carrying sick people and the family water and goods. Jesus used a colt to illustrate the humility that Christians should have and live for. The church is called to a humbled mission of the cross. Jesus in this passion week promotes humility on the way to the cross.

While on the colt, Jesus was followed by great multitude that threw their extra clothes on the road. They held tree branches and sang to fulfill the old prophecy and to support the coming of the new dawn. Jesus' entry, we are told, caused people in the city going about their business, as well as guests in the city, to celebrate Passover, to want to know this important person coming to the city.

The responses were mixed. Some people said Jesus was a “prophet from Nazareth in Galilee,” just someone inspired by God to deliver the message of God. But Jesus was much more than a prophet. He saves the souls lost in sin. When Jesus enters a person’s soul, he causes the same turmoil as he did to the people in city of Jerusalem.

When Jesus entered into my life, initially I was confused. I prayed and reflected and pondered on what to do—what belief systems to let go of and what practices I valued in my life, their impact on me and what would happen if I stopped them. I went through gut-wrenching moments. I evaluated every pro and con, and finally, by the help of the Holy Spirit, I decided to follow the teachings of Christ and adhere to them despite my old inherent values that formed my personality.

Over time I acquired a Christian personality that forms who I am today. Often your faith can do the same to you as it did to me. I can claim with St Paul, “It’s not me who lives but Christ lives in me.” Recognizing Jesus as a personal savior is the first step of forming a Christian personality. Over time it gets easier to identify your Christian identity with other identities formed before you became a Christian. Or, when one has lost faith in Christ and acquired other ways of living and expressing their personal life without Christ.

The suffering that Christ went through this week is a reminder for me to empty myself of any evil thoughts and practices so as to have the same mind Jesus Christ had when he humbled himself by mounting the colt to save me. The soap to clean my thoughts is the Word of God. St Paul reminds you and me, when we empty ourselves and have the mind Christ had, God will exalt us. God will promote us. God will give us dignity among mortals and will fight battles for us.

In the Philippians narrative, St Paul reminds us that our goal is to love God and to love others. We should not replace the love God-human concept with loving things instead. Replacing God-human love creates a human machine marked by pride, hatred, and ‘better-than-thou’ beliefs. Jesus will go to the cross this week to make us new, to reclaim and make us people of God-human love and that is being the people of the cross.

When Jesus entered the life of Nicodemus, he became a new creation. NICODEMUS NEVER WENT BACK to his elitist life, but began to practice the life of the cross. When a Samaritan woman reclaimed her new life in Christ, she became ‘a new creation.’ She acquired a new outlook on her life—a new personality. She made room to love God and all the people of her city. She became a preacher to her city’s people, and they accepted Christ to be their savior.

These two people—Nicodemus and the woman at the well—remind us of what being ‘a new creation’ means. It’s being born again, being the people of the cross. St John says those born of the Spirit worship in spirit and truth, their old life passes away and their new life starts. Thus, why St Paul compares the old versus a new life.

Jesus’ actions this week is geared to draw all people to God. They are intended to bring people back to God to fulfill the purpose of their being created—to love God

and others. They are not intended to cause us to love material things meant to make our living easier. The events starting today should draw us close to God, maybe watching a movie of the innocent Christ being beaten, or reading about a kangaroo court deciding Christ should die without being heard, or visualizing Mary, mother of Jesus agonizing at the cross, or hearing the disciples' miserable voices. All these should remind us to take on our respective roles of being faithful believers. This is to me the reason I vowed "to live is Christ and to die is Christ." I have faith beyond the grave that has scared us these last weeks. I have met a number of our members who say, "I am ready to be with Christ enjoying eternity." And eternity they will enjoy with the Lord. Will you?

Amen.