



## Sermon, Sunday March 24, 2024

### “The Tragic Triumph of Christ” by Bob Carl

**SCRIPTURE: Matthew 21:1-11** <sup>1</sup> When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, <sup>2</sup> saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. <sup>3</sup> If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately.” <sup>4</sup> This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: <sup>5</sup> “Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” <sup>6</sup> The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; <sup>7</sup> they brought the donkey and the colt and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. <sup>8</sup> A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. <sup>9</sup> The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!” <sup>10</sup> When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” <sup>11</sup> The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

### Message

The classic definition of tragedy is the depiction of a strong, dominant person struggling against forces that are sure to overcome and defeat that person. The climax of tragedy is not the defeat, but rather the point at which the person almost succeeds. The climax in the human tragedy of the life of Jesus, which ended in the crucifixion, is Palm Sunday, when Jesus made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem and received the homage of its citizens as their king. At that point it appeared as if he had succeeded in establishing the kingdom of God on earth. At no other time in his career was his messiahship so generally and completely recognized as it was on Palm Sunday.

That day began in an act of amazing generosity. Jesus sent two disciples into a nearby village and told them that they would find a donkey and its colt tied outside a house there, which they were to unloose and bring to him. If the owner should object, all they had to say was, “the lord needs them” and without further ado he would send them. And this is precisely what happened. Without asking the purpose or debating its merits, the owner of those animals sent them just because Jesus requested that he do so. He did not know the disciples and they did not know him. But he knew Jesus and that was enough. He realized that the needs of Jesus and his kingdom were more worthwhile and important than any needs of his own.

There was a pastor who received an urgent call from his conference for financial help to meet an emergency. Does that sound familiar to anyone? Immediately he picked up the phone and called certain of his members. All he said was, “This your pastor. A dire need has arisen. Please write a check to help meet it and put it in the mail to me today.” This action astounded those around him. His explanation was that they knew he would not call them unless he believed the cause he represented was worthy of their Christian charity. And to that request they had never failed to respond.

What a person gives in time, energy, and resources to the cause of Christ is more indicative of his or her commitment than anything else. We use the tithe as the minimum of our income to be given to God through the church, but this is applicable only to persons of very limited means and with heavy family obligations. People



of ample means should give much more, giving to Christian charity as much, where possible, as they spend on themselves. "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required," said our Lord. John Wesley made this entry in his private diary less than eight months before his death: "As my sight fails me much, I do not purpose to keep any more accounts. It suffices that I gain all I can, save all I can, and give all I can, that is, all I have."

The glamor and glory of Palm Sunday lies in the enthusiastic welcome the people gave Jesus and the hospitality they showed him as he entered Jerusalem. The crowd that came down from Galilee with him swelled into a multitude when it was joined by the throngs that came out of the city to greet Jesus. Both those who came to meet him and those that followed him cut branches from the palm trees and screwed them in the road before him. This was the custom the Jews practiced in those days to welcome a hero. They had done this a century earlier to honor Judas Maccabaeus after he had thrown off the oppressive yoke of the Seleucids and extricated the temple from profanities by Antiochus Epiphanes, who had erected his own statue there. Our equivalent today would be the ticker tape and confetti the citizens of New York City shower on our heroes as they parade down Broadway. General Eisenhower, for example, was given the biggest welcome anyone had ever received from New Yorkers, when he returned victorious over the Nazis in the Second World War. Likewise, presenting the keys to the city to a celebrity on a visit to our town is similar, though far less significant, than the adoration shown to Jesus on that first Palm Sunday.

Some of the people actually took off their cloaks, the finest garments they owned, and spread them in the way before Jesus, allowing them to be trampled on by his donkey. Sir Walter Raleigh did the same thing when he threw his cape at the feet of Queen Elizabeth I to keep her from soiling her shoes in the mud. He would not have done this for just anybody. He did it because she was his queen. The people of Jerusalem did what they did because they recognized Jesus as the Messiah. They acknowledged him as their king. Consequently, they shouted their hosanna, which meant "save now, we beseech thee." They called him the Son of David, the one who comes in the name of the lord, thereby recognizing him as sovereign and welcoming the establishment of his kingdom in their midst. They pledged their allegiance and obedience to him.

Absolute obedience to Jesus Christ and allegiance to him and his kingdom before and above all other allegiances is the hallmark of being a Christian. Jesus is totalitarian in his rule over his followers. We either give him everything, including ourselves, or he will accept nothing from us. Our attestation of allegiance to him is null and void unless it is complete. Jesus said, "so likewise, whosoever of you does not forsake all he has cannot be my disciple."

Jesus' triumph on Palm Sunday would have been complete if the outward show of generosity, welcome, hospitality, submission and obedience on the part of the people had been a genuine display of their inner feelings and commitment of their total being and his kingdom. No doubt, the people thought it was and at the time had acted sincerely in their response to him. But unfortunately, it was not. Their loyalty was short-lived. Before the end of the week they had changed their minds about him. On Friday, he, whom they had heralded as Messiah and king on Sunday, was denounced by them as an imposter, rebel, blasphemer, and deserving of death as a criminal. Jesus's triumph on Palm Sunday was tragic, all the more so, because it had been so glamorous and glorious, and because the very people who staged it were to betray him to his enemies in the end. He had no kingdom after all - that is an earthly one - for all his subjects either rebelled against him or deserted him. Like the last Roman emperor in battle with the Turks at the walls of Constantinople, he might have well opined, "what good is an emperor without an empire!"

The reason for this sudden reversal of the people in their attitude toward Jesus was that they had misunderstood the personality of their king and his kingdom. They expected him to be an all-powerful, temporal ruler, proud and mighty, triumphant over all their enemies, who would release them from Roman servitude. They expected his kingdom to displace the Roman Empire, making Jerusalem the capital and the



center of world commerce, so that would become rich and influential. They overlooked the fact that Jesus rode into the city on a donkey, the beast of burden, not on a white steed of conquest.

And they forgot their own history. The judges had ridden white asses when they had gone about the country adjudicating the wrongs of the people and assuring justice by meting out judgement. Jesus portrayed kingship as servanthood: "the greatest among you will be your servant". And he demanded justice and righteousness just as the judges had done, for he drove the greedy merchants and money changers out of the Temple and overturned their tables of trade. His goal in life was holiness, not fame and fortune and victory over ones enemies. Because of all this, the people deserted him. They followed him for what they had expected to get out of him. When he did not give them what they wanted, they left him. Jesus wanted them to give their lives and, with him, serve God by serving God's people.

That is what Jesus wants of us as well. Jesus didn't come to enrich his devotees with material goods, the comforts and conveniences that money can buy. Nor was his mission to empower his followers to rule over others and to attain eminence in the secular world. His religion was not a means of self-aggrandizement and worldly success. The greed and corruption that characterize contemporary society are the antithesis of his kingdom and the denial of his gospel. He taught that only the meek shall inherit the earth and that the pure in heart alone will be able to see God. Too many today confess his name while, by their behavior and business activity, they deny his precepts and make a caricature of his way of life. With our lips we declare Jesus' triumph over sin and death, but by our deeds we debase the triumph of Palm Sunday, turning it into the tragedy of Good Friday.

This Palm Sunday, may Christ enable us to see the attractiveness of holiness and sense the abiding joy of service to others and also give us the power of their fulfillment in our own lives, that his triumph may be ours, both now and throughout eternity.

Amen

