

PALM SUNDAY ***THE PEACE OF GOD***

Palm Sunday
April 28, 2024
Revision E

Gospel: John 12:1-18
Epistle: Philippians 4:4-9

In the West, the Palm Sunday Gospel readings are taken from the parallel accounts in Matthew 21, Mark 11 or Luke 19. The reading from John is used in part on Monday of Holy Week, and in part on Christ the King Sunday in November. The Epistle lesson is used sometimes two Sundays ago and sometimes on Thanksgiving Day.

Gospel: John 12:1-18

The Gospel lesson can be broken into two parts: the anointing of Jesus by Mary of Bethany and the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. These two events are found in the four Gospels:

Anointing	Matthew 26:6-13, Mark 14:3-9, John 12:2-8
Triumphal Entry	Matthew 21:1-11, Mark 11:1-11, Luke 19:28-40, John 12:12-18

The Anointing of Jesus by Mary

These passages may appear to be self-contradicting as shown in Table I by comparing the accounts in Matthew, Mark and John. One might ask: which account is correct, Matthew and Mark or John? Was it two days before Passover or six? Was it at Simon's house or Mary and Martha's? If Martha served, it was probably at her house (John 12:2). Did Mary anoint Jesus' head or feet or both? Was it just Judas, or were some of the others indignant also?

Two different events may be involved in these accounts, one occurring six days before Passover, the other two days before Passover. Mary started with a pound (Greek: *litra* meaning the Roman 12 Troy ounce pound) of oil of spikenard, which was imported from East India. (An unrelated plant with an aromatic root and the same name is grown in the U.S.). She anointed Jesus' feet the evening prior to Palm Sabbath, which was a Saturday. Then on Wednesday evening she did it again, this time breaking the alabaster flask and pouring the rest of the oil of nard on Jesus' head such that it ran down his beard, shoulders, etc. Because of the first anointing, Jesus smelled like a King as He rode into Jerusalem on the colt. Because of the second, He smelled like a King at His burial.

Simon the leper (Matthew 26:6, Mark 14:3) is also called Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36-50) and it may have been him who was healed of his leprosy by Jesus in Luke 5:12-16. Simon later was ordained as an apostle and evangelized the area around Gaul (modern France). There is strong tradition of Mary and Martha helping to evangelize Gaul also and they may have worked with Simon (who later took the name Julian) in this area. From our Gospel lesson and the parallel accounts, Simon, Mary and Martha all lived in Bethany and were probably close friends

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**TABLE I
THE ANOINTING OF JESUS**

	JOHN	MATTHEW	MARK
When?	Six days before Passover	Two days before Passover	Two days before Passover
Where?	At house of Mary & Martha	At home of Simon the Leper	At home of Simon the Leper
Who?	Mary of Bethany	A woman	A woman
What material?	A litra of very costly Oil of pure nard	Very costly fragrant oil	Very costly oil of pure nard
How applied?	Anointed Jesus feet, wiped with her hair	Poured on Jesus' head	Broke flask and poured on Jesus' head
What container?	-----	An alabaster flask	An alabaster flask
Reaction of 12	Judas Iscariot questioned why this was done	His disciples were angry	Some were angry with themselves

and may have been relatives. Mary spent the last 30 years of her life in fasting and prayer living in a cave in the Alps.

John's Gospel records Judas' objection to Mary anointing Jesus: "Why was this fragrant oil not sold for 300 denarii and given to the poor? This he said, not that he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief, and had the money box; and he used to take what was put in it" (John 12:5-6). A question we might ask today: If this were put to a vote at the Finance Committee meeting at most Churches, would the money box still be given to Judas?

John Chrysostom asked why the Lord put the bag for the poor in the hands of a thief, and made him steward who was a lover of money? Chrysostom conjectured that this "cut him off from all excuse. For (Judas) could not say that he betrayed the Lord from love of money, for he had in the bag sufficient to satisfy his desire, but from excessive wickedness, which Christ wished to restrain. Wherefore He did not even rebuke (Judas) as stealing, although aware of it. 'Let her alone', He said, 'for she has kept this for the day of My burial'" (John 12:7). But the Lord's words did not reach or soften Judas at all. Even at the Lord's Supper in the upper room, when Satan entered Judas (John 13:27), the Lord told him "what you do, do quickly" (Homily LXV on John 12).

This presents quite a contrast between Mary and Judas. Both had followed Jesus for three years, and Judas had even been given the authority to heal the sick and raise the dead. Both had watched the Master do the same. But the realization of just Who Jesus was had penetrated Mary's heart, but had not affected Judas. Mary so appreciated the Master's forgiveness that she spent a great deal of money on ointment to prepare for His burial (John 12:7). Judas couldn't care less, and sold the Master for a few coins (Matthew 26:15). One of the hymns for Palm Sunday states, "While Mary brought expensive oil, the disciple came to an agreement with the transgressors. She rejoiced to pour out what was very precious, he made haste to sell the One Who is above all price.

She acknowledged Christ as Lord; he severed himself from the Master. She was set free, but Judas became the slave of the enemy. Grievous was his lack of love! Great was her repentance!”

Commenting on Judas’ love of money, Chrysostom pointed out that Paul referred to covetousness as idolatry (Colossians 3:5). “Far more grievous than an evil spirit is the lust of money-loving, and many obey it more than others do idols. For these in many things disobey; but in this case they yield everything, and whatever it tells them to do, they obey. ‘Be at war with all’, it says, ‘at enmity with all, know not nature, despise God, sacrifice to me yourself’, and in all they obey. To the graven images they sacrifice oxen and sheep; but avarice says, ‘sacrifice to me your own soul’, and the man obeys” (Ibid.).

The Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem

The entry into Jerusalem was a series of events, and details are scattered throughout the four Gospels. First Jesus instructed two of His disciples to go to the village opposite Bethany and get a donkey’s colt (Mark 11:1-6). The twelve then spread their clothes on the donkey for Jesus to sit on (Mark 11:7). As Jesus entered Jerusalem, He entered from the Mount of Olives which rises about 2,700 feet higher than Jerusalem. Thus, Jesus came down from the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem, which according to tradition was the route the Messiah was supposed to take. As He came, people spread their own clothes on the road and also cut down leafy branches to spread on the road (Mark 11:8). Not only did the people say, “Blessed is He that comes in the Name of the Lord”, but also “Blessed is the Kingdom of our father David that comes in the Name of the Lord” (Mark 11:9-10).

Riding a donkey was a sign of humility. Kings and rulers would ride on horses or chariots to show their strength. But Jesus’ mission was not to show His strength; it was to show His humility as was the subject of the Gospel lesson last week (Mark 10:42-45). His glorification consisted in His taking up His cross, which was His mission (John 12:23-28) and has now become our mission (Matthew 10:38, 16:24, Luke 14:27, Mark 10:21).

Regarding Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, John quoted a section from the Prophet Zechariah (9:9-15) which is part of the readings for Vespers before Palm Sunday. “Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your King is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt” (John 12:15). The disciples knew this text and they knew what it implied. Reading the complete text from Zechariah, there are mixed images of Jesus’ first and second coming and it was easy for them to think that this was the beginning of the Kingdom of God on earth where “His dominion will be from sea to sea, and from the River (i.e., Euphrates) to the ends of the earth” (Zechariah 9:10). However, “His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things were written about Him and that they had done these things to Him” (John 12:16). Jesus had told them many times about how He was going to be crucified. (See 3rd Sunday in Lent for details). They just didn’t believe He would let it happen when He was powerful enough to prevent it (Matthew 26:52-54). At this point, they were still relying on human wisdom, not divine wisdom, such as they obtained at Pentecost. Divine Wisdom was concealed from the wise of this world. For more details on how Jesus will reenact this scenario at the Second Coming (i.e. enter Jerusalem in Glory from the Mount of Olives), see the study for the Feast Day of the Ascension.

Another of the readings for Vespers is Zephaniah 3:14-19. This also speaks of the Lord's entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Zephaniah also states, "Shout for joy, O daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter of Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away His judgments against you" (vv.14-15). "I will gather those who grieve about the appointed feasts" (v.18). "I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will turn their shame into praise and renown in all the earth" (v.19). This passage speaks largely about the result of the Lord's entry into Jerusalem and its aftermath.

The third reading for Vespers is Genesis 49:1, 2, 8-12. In this passage, Jacob was an old man living in Egypt with his sons and he prophesied regarding their future just before he died. Jacob referred to Judah as a young lion that no one dares to rouse up (v.9). "A ruler shall not fail from Judah, nor a prince from his loins, until there come the things stored up for Him; and He is the expectation of the nations" (v.10 LXX). It wasn't until 40 years after Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, when the Romans destroyed the city, that a prince or ruler failed. Prior to that, there was a continuous lineage of kings and princes dating back to Judah (Matthew 1:2-17).

As the Lord rode along, some of the Pharisees asked Him to rebuke His disciples, since the whole multitude of the disciples had begun to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works they had seen, thus honoring Jesus as Messiah. Among these mighty works was the raising of Lazarus (who had been dead four days) which occurred within the last three months (John 11:38-46). The raising of Lazarus had been prophetic of the Lord's own upcoming resurrection. In the face of this criticism, the Lord's reply to the Pharisees was that if His disciples were to keep silent, even the stones would cry out (Luke 19:37-40).

As Jesus went along and drew near to Jerusalem, He began to weep over the city, saying, "If only you had known the things that make for your peace!" He continued to say that, "because you did not know the time of your visitation", that the days will come when your enemies will level you to the ground (Luke 19:41-44).

Upon arriving in Jerusalem, Jesus went straight to the Temple and drove out the moneychangers and those who sold doves saying, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations! But you have made it a den of thieves" (Mark 11:15-17). These people were there at the Temple because of the Lord's command for all Jewish men to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem three times a year at the Feasts of Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles (Deuteronomy 16:16-17). The pilgrims were to bring their tithes with them and rejoice before the Lord with their household. If they came from a great distance and couldn't bring the tithe of their livestock, they were to convert it to money before they came and spend the money in Jerusalem (Deuteronomy 14:22-27). The moneychangers served as the foreign currency exchange for all the people from distant countries. But it was more than just that. Foreign money could not be used to buy any animal sacrifices; one had to use the shekel of the sanctuary (Leviticus 5:15). In addition, there was the "temple tax" (Exodus 30:11-16) that Jesus paid even though He didn't have to (Matthew 17:24-27). This "temple tax" was required from foreigners - payable in shekels of the sanctuary - before they could bring any offering forward. And the moneychangers could charge anything they saw proper to perform this "service". Many evils are easy to justify if one thinks it's being done "for God".

The Mosaic Law, however, strictly forbade making profits off people trying to be godly. For example, the Mosaic Law specified that if a citizen of Israel or a foreign visitor were to become poor, he was to be supported and no interest charged (Leviticus 25:35-37). This became a big issue during Nehemiah's time and Nehemiah extracted an oath from the priests that they would refrain from any interest or markup charged against their brothers during a famine (Nehemiah 5:1-13). Following the cleansing of the temple (where Jesus would not allow any vendors to hawk their wares in the temple, Mark 11:16), Jesus left the city for the night to frustrate nighttime assassination attempts by the scribes and chief priests (Mark 11:18-19).

Israel, the Light of the World

Contrasting the way Israel was governed by its rulers in the 1st Century was an Israel that was supposed to be the light of the world. The Lord, in speaking to the Twelve, said, "You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lamp stand, and it gives light to all who are in the house (Matthew 5:14-15). Israel was also to be the light of the world and the city set on a hill. There are several aspects to this:

From The Mosaic Law: Keeping all aspects of the Law illustrates Wisdom to all people of the earth (Deuteronomy 4:6), where Wisdom is Christ. The Queen of Sheba demonstrated this during her visit to King Solomon (1 Kings 10:1-4). If people could see the righteousness of God, they would seek to imitate Israel (Deuteronomy 4:8), where righteousness and justice are the foundation of the Throne of God (Psalm 89:14, 97:2). Just as the Twelve Apostles took the message of the Gospel to the entire world (Matthew 28:18-20), so Israel was supposed to do by example. Since all the visitors to Israel were to be treated as if they were native-born (Leviticus 19:34), this was a tremendous witness to the love of God for the world.

A Personal God: Whenever Israel called on the Lord, He answered (Deuteronomy 4:7), since He dwelt between the cherubim in the Holy of Holies (Exodus 25:22). The Lord showed Himself to be genuinely concerned for the poor man, the brokenhearted, widows and orphans, and not just for the rich and powerful (Deuteronomy 14:28-29, 24:19-22, 26:12-15; Isaiah 1:17). God had personally chosen Israel, and revealed all this to them. Because He loved their fathers, He chose their descendants (Deuteronomy 4:35-37).

Spectacular Signs and Wonders: The spectacular events associated with the giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai became known to the world (Deuteronomy 4:33). This included the thunder, the lightning, the earthquakes, the smoke, and a huge fire reaching to the heavens (Exodus 19:16-19, Deuteronomy 4:11). God spoke to the people from the midst of the fire (Deuteronomy 4:36), and Moses walked up the mountain right into this fire (Exodus 24:16-18). Clement of Alexandria referred to this as, "The Lord's Voice, the Word, without shape, the Power of the Word, the luminous Word of the Lord, the Truth from heaven, coming to the assembly of the Church" (*Stromata* VI, iv). All the neighboring nations knew how the plagues and the Red Sea decimated Egypt (Joshua 2:9-11). They knew how the Lord had fought for Israel against Amalek in the wilderness (Exodus 17:8-16). They knew how Israel had overrun Og and Sihon, the kings of the Amorites who were both stronger than Israel (Deuteronomy 4:38), and how the hornets had helped (Joshua 2:10, 24:12). This had never been done before: taking out a nation from within another

nation by trials, by signs and by wonders (Deuteronomy 4:34-37). How could any nation contend with Israel when the supernatural was normal procedure?

The Murderous Plot Develops

The public opinion at the time was so strongly in favor of Jesus that the chief priests and Pharisees were concerned that Jesus would upset the political balance and bring on Roman intervention (John 11:47-54). This had happened on numerous occasions when nationalistic zealots gained popularity and tried to overthrow the Roman rule (Acts 5:35-37). This was also what brought on the destruction of Jerusalem in 66-70 AD.

To counter this surge in Jesus' popularity, the chief priests also plotted to kill Lazarus (John 12:10). They followed through with the plot on Lazarus after the resurrection: After putting Lazarus, Mary, Martha and one other person in a small, leaking boat, they cast them adrift in the Mediterranean without oars, food or water. The four survived when the boat landed on Cyprus, miraculously, and Lazarus later become bishop of Cyprus.

Public opinion strongly favored Jesus, where the multitudes believed in Him. "And many of the people believed in Him and said, 'when the Christ comes, will He do more signs than these which this Man has done?'" (John 7:31). On the other hand, the Jewish rulers said, "Have any of the rulers or the Pharisees believed in Him? But this crowd that does not know the Law is accursed" (John 7:48-49). They overlooked Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea who had not revealed themselves yet (John 19:38-39).

'Chrysostom commented, "As wealth is wont to hurl into destruction those who are not heedful, so also is power. The first leads to covetousness; the second, into pride."

"Yet what charge had they against Lazarus, that they sought to kill him? (John 12:10) Is the having received a benefit a crime? Do you see how murderous is their will?" (Homily LXVI on John 12)

Lazarus had not claimed to be equal to the Father as Jesus had (John 10:29-33). Chrysostom compared Lazarus with the man born blind (John 9:1-38). The man born blind was able to see through the hypocritical blindness of the Pharisees who refused to admit that he had indeed been blind (John 9:18). When the formerly blind man confronted them with this, they cast him out of the Temple (John 9:29-34), meaning he was cut off from religious life in Israel.

As opposed to the formerly blind man, "Lazarus was a person of distinction, as is clear, since many came to comfort his sisters. And the miracle was done in the sight of all, and most marvelously. On which account all ran to see. This then stung them (the Pharisees), that while the feast was going on, all should leave it and go to Bethany. They set their hand therefore to kill him (Lazarus), and thought they were not daring anything, so murderous were they. On this account...the Prophet brings this charge against them (Isaiah 1:15), 'Your hands are covered with blood'" (Ibid.).

THE PEACE OF GOD

**April 12, 2020
Revision E**

Epistle: Philippians 4:4-9

Philippians was written in the early 60's AD while Paul was under house arrest in Rome. Acts 28 ended with Paul still under house arrest and Philippians was probably written after Acts 28 concluded but before Paul was released. Paul had started the church in Philippi on his second missionary journey in 50-51 AD when he was traveling with Silas (Acts 16:9-40).

The Evangelist Luke joined Paul in Troas (Acts 16:8) and went with Paul and Silas to Philippi. We can see this from Luke's narrative in Acts. Beginning Paul's second missionary journey in Acts 15:40, Luke's narrative uses the 3rd person "he" and "they". As they went from Troas to Macedonia, Luke switched to the first person "we" (Acts 16:10).

In Acts 17:1, when Paul left Philippi for Thessalonica, Luke switched back to the third person "they", indicating that Luke had been left behind in Philippi. About five years later, when Paul came through Philippi again (Acts 20:1-6), Luke again switched back to the first person "we" indicating that Luke rejoined Paul. Thus Luke had been active in the Philippi area for a long time before rejoining Paul toward the end of his third missionary journey in about 57 AD.

Paul addressed his letter to the saints who were in Philippi with the bishops (Greek: *episkopos* from which comes the word Episcopal) and deacons. Philippi was a major city in Macedonia (Acts 16:12) and a large church existed there when Paul wrote this letter. One of the people Paul addressed was Clement (Philippians 4:3) who was ordained bishop of Rome about 4 years later by the Apostle Peter just prior to Peter's martyrdom.

Joy in the Lord

The theme of the section of Philippians chosen for today is **Rejoice, for the Lord is at hand** (Philippians 4:4-5). This goes with the theme of the Gospel lesson, which describes the rejoicing in Jerusalem as the King comes humbly riding on a donkey. It's interesting how Paul connected rejoicing with prayer (v.6). He said the same thing in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-17, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing..." and in Romans 12:12 "...Rejoicing in hope...continuing in steadfast prayer."

At other times Paul spoke of being "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (2 Corinthians 6:10). This describes the Lord as He entered Jerusalem, and wept over the city (Luke 19:41). Yet for the joy set before Him, Jesus endured the cross and shame (Hebrews 12:2) and has taken His rightful place at the Right Hand of the throne of God.

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Chrysostom pointed out that the Scriptures say, “Blessed are they that mourn” (Matthew 5:4) and “Woe to them that laugh” (Luke 6:25). How then does Paul say, “Rejoice in the Lord always”? (Philippians 4:4). These are not contradictory. (The Lord) “blessed those that mourn, not simply for the loss of relatives, but those who are cut to the heart (Acts 2:37), who mourn their own faults and take count of their own sins, or even those of others. This joy is not contrary to that grief, but from that grief, it too is born. For he who grieves for his own faults, and confesses them, rejoices (Homily xiv on Philippians 4).

The Peace of God

The Peace of God has a dimension to it that is completely beyond man’s understanding, and this is illustrated by the events of Palm Sunday and following. The King of Heaven and Earth came to His chosen people in humility, riding a donkey, not a chariot. While He was more than worthy of any acclaim they could possibly have given Him, His mission was to take on the public ridicule and shameful death that His own people would give out. And this He called His glory (John 12:23-26).

Paul went on to speak of the “Peace of God, which surpasses all understanding” (Philippians 4:7); this has several connotations. As Chrysostom said, “For who could have expected, who could have hoped, that such good things would have come? They exceed all man’s understanding. For His enemies, for those who hated Him, for those who determined to turn themselves away; for these He refused not to deliver up His Only Begotten Son, that He might make peace with us. This Peace then, i.e. the reconciliation, the love of God, shall guard your hearts and your thoughts.”

A similar situation exists in our dealings with others. “When He tells us to be at peace with our enemies, with those who treat us unjustly, with those who are at war and enmity toward us; is it not beyond man’s understanding?” (Ibid.).

In connection with the Peace of God, Paul advised the Philippians to meditate on whatever things are:

- true
- revered or worshipful
- righteous or correct
- holy (as in Holy Spirit)
- agreeable (from Greek *phileo* = to love)
- of good report
- virtuous or morally good
- praise worthy

Then Paul connects these with “the things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me: these do” (vv.8-9). At first glance from most English translations, the above list sounds like an encouragement to get involved in fine art, good music, noble causes, etc. But there is more to it than that. The connotation of the Greek text has a spiritual dimension that most English translations don’t convey.

Remembering that the context is the Peace of God, Chrysostom notes that vice and fornication create enemies and conflict while almsgiving produces peace. Covetousness treats us like an enemy while justice makes all men friends. “Virtue, like a truly kind mother, places us in safety, while vice is a treacherous thing and full of danger.”

Chrysostom connected things that are “revered” to things belonging to external virtue, while those things that are “righteous”, he referred to the soul. “Give no cause of stumbling, said he (Paul), nor handle of accusation. Because he had said, ‘whatever things of good report’, lest you should think that he means only those things which are so in the sight of men.”

“Be at peace with all men; consider with what character God saves you. ‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God’ (Matthew 5:9). Peacemakers always imitate the Son of God; do you imitate Him too. Be at peace. The more your brother wars against you, by so much greater will be your reward. For hear the prophet who says, ‘I was peaceable among them that hated peace’ (Psalms 120:7 LXX). This is virtue; this is above man’s understanding; this makes us near God. Nothing so much delights God as to remember no evil” (Ibid.).

This is how our Lord came to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. He knew He would be crucified in a few days and He wept over the city (Luke 19:41) knowing that they didn’t know what they were doing (Luke 23:34) and they didn’t know the time of their visitation (Luke 19:44).