

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

From Matthew chapter ten: Jesus said, *"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword."*

In our Palm Sunday service, we remember the last week of our Lord's ministry, and particularly his triumphal entry into Jerusalem at the beginning of Holy Week. On this day, our Lord fulfilled the prophecy of Zechariah chapter 9:

*"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!  
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!  
Behold, your king is coming to you;  
righteous and having salvation is he,  
humble and mounted on a donkey,  
on a colt, the foal of a donkey."*

Jesus, the true King of Jerusalem, entered his city peacefully – on a donkey rather than a warhorse – but he did not enter unarmed. As he promised, the Prince of Peace brought a sword. In fact, like the apostles in Luke chapter 22, we should think of Jesus bringing two swords: a sword of judgment for those who rejected him and a sword of martyrdom for those who follow him.

What do we mean by the sword of judgment? The answer lies in what followed the Triumphal Entry. Though the Jewish crowds welcomed our Lord into Jerusalem with shouts of praise on Palm Sunday, just days later they were calling for his crucifixion. Led by those who wished to preserve their religious status and political power, the people of Jerusalem rejected their Messiah. On Sunday, "Hosanna" passed their lips, but on Friday, their cry had turned to "Let his blood be on us and on our children."

For these faithless ones, our Lord brought judgment. He repeatedly prophesied of this judgment and mourned for those who would endure it. In Matthew chapter 23, he cried out:

*"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you desolate."*

On his way to be executed, our Lord corrected the women who mourned for him, saying in Luke chapter 23:

*"Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!'"*

Sadly, these were not empty words. Forty years later, Roman legions destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple, fulfilling our Lord's prophecies, subduing the Jews, and bringing the Old Covenant to a violent end.

For the faithful, though, Jesus came with a different sword: the sword of martyrdom. Christians have always faced persecution—first from the Jews, then from authorities and enemies throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. Of the faithful apostles, likely all but John were killed for proclaiming Jesus as Lord. Beyond the apostles, countless believers, beginning with Stephen in Acts chapter 7, have proved willing to suffer and die rather than deny Christ. Jesus foretold this persecution in Matthew chapter ten:

*"Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles."*

The Church calls those who die for the Christian faith "martyrs"—from the Greek word meaning "witness." While persecution scattered the Jews and ended the Old Covenant, it could not destroy the growing Jesus movement. On the contrary, the faith shown by martyrs in dying bore witness to and helped spread the message of Christ. As the second-century Church Father Tertullian wrote, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." To this day, Christians worldwide bear witness to their faith in martyrdom. And while we may not expect to be killed for our faith in this country, we are still called to devote our lives entirely to our Lord. As Jesus said in Matthew chapter 16:

*"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."*

What could possibly possess otherwise normal people to give up their lives for a rabbi from Galilee? The answer is the Gospel—the Good News that has turned the hearts of persecutors, persuaded hardened sinners to repent, and caused the rich and powerful to forsake their earthly benefits throughout all nations and ages.

The good news is this startling revelation: the Most High God, sovereign over all the universe, loves us and has entered our human life to save us from sin and death. Jesus, the Son of God and God incarnate as man, is the prophesied Messiah and King of the cosmos. Yet his greatest act as King was not to sit in judgment but to humble himself. As our epistle proclaims:

*"And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross."*

He willingly submitted to unjust betrayal and execution on the Cross, then rose from the dead, trampling down death by death. The sword of judgment, that should have fallen on us, he bore instead. The call to martyrdom becomes a joyful invitation in the knowledge that he has gone before us and conquered death itself.

How can we today respond to this Gospel? Here are three ideas as we enter Holy Week:

First, participate fully in this Holy Week ahead of us. If possible, attend the sacred services the Church has handed down through the years and marvel at the Gospel, whether for the first time in your life or the thousandth.

Second, in love for our Lord, make a humble confession. Repent of your sins and receive the grace extended to us in Christ's sacrifice. Remember that while Jesus is the great Judge, he is also the source of unending mercy.

Finally, enter into your own martyrdom. Bear the cross that the great Carpenter has hand-crafted for you. Give up whatever holds you back from following Christ to the fullest and receive the new life he longs to give you. As the great Reformation hymn "A Mighty Fortress" proclaims:

*"Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also.  
The body they may kill; God's truth abideth still.  
His Kingdom is forever."*

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