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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Midweek Liturgy, Wednesday, June 12, 2024
Matthew 21:1-17

HOLY GOSPEL Matthew 21:1-17, RSV
Last week we read the story of Jesus healing two blind men. Now we read of his triumphant entry into Jerusalem and his driving out of the money changers from the temple.

Before the Gospel:

☐ The Holy Gospel according to Saint Matthew, the Twenty-first Chapter:
☑ **Glory to you, O Lord.**

¹And when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Beth'phage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying to them, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find an ass tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³If any one says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord has need of them,' and he will send them immediately." ⁴This took place to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet, saying,

⁵"Tell the daughter of Zion,
Behold, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on an ass,
and on a colt, the foal of an ass."

⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷they brought the ass and the colt, and put their garments on them, and he sat thereon. ⁸Most of the crowd spread their garments on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹And the crowds that went before him and that followed him shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" ¹⁰And when he entered Jerusalem, all the city was stirred, saying, "Who is this?" ¹¹And the crowds said, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee."

¹²And Jesus entered the temple of God and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. ¹³He said to them, "It is written,

‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you make it a den of robbers.”

¹⁴And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them. ¹⁵But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” they were indignant; ¹⁶and they said to him, “Do you hear what these are saying?” And Jesus said to them, “Yes; have you never read,

‘Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings
thou hast brought perfect praise?’”

¹⁷And leaving them, he went out of the city to Bethany and lodged there.

After the Gospel:

📖 The Gospel of the Lord.

👉 **Praise to you, O Christ.**

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Three times earlier in St. Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus has forewarned his disciples that they are heading to Jerusalem where he will suffer many things, be killed, and be raised again on the third day (Matthew 16:21, 17:23, 20:19). Now, they have arrived in Jerusalem. But the dramatic things of which Jesus forewarned his disciples do not immediately begin. Palm Sunday is not immediately followed by Good Friday and Easter. Instead, we have miles to go before the events of Holy Week. We have many parables and many conversations to consider. We are just beginning Chapter 21 of St. Matthew’s Gospel. Judas does not go to the chief priests agreeing to betray Jesus for thirty piece of silver... Judas does not do that wicked negotiation until Chapter 26. So, we still have some time. Jesus is still free for at least five chapters ahead of us.

But Jesus *has* arrived in Jerusalem. His long path has led him to this town, as he told his disciples it would. And what a spectacular entrance he makes into that capital city. Here he is, a man from Galilee. He is the carpenter’s son. To the scholars and ruling class of Jerusalem, he probably seemed to be a country bumpkin. But not to the children of that town! Listen to the report of their praise:

¹⁵But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they were indignant; (Matthew 21:15, RSV)

Well, those high folks — the chief priests and scribes — might have been indignant at the shouts of the children, but the children have it right. They have wisdom beyond their years... wisdom beyond even the chief priests and scribes.

"Who is this?" the whole city asks. And the crowds answer, speaking of a prophet:

¹⁰And when he entered Jerusalem, all the city was stirred, saying, "Who is this?" ¹¹And the crowds said, "This is the *prophet* Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee." (Matthew 21:10-11, RSV, my emphasis)

Now, there is a *big* word in Israel: "prophet." How thrilling it must have been to the people to believe that in their generation, the Lord had blessed Israel again with a "prophet." Prophets are greater than theologians. Theologians speak *about* God; prophets speak *for* Him. We hope that what the theologians say *about* God is true. But even if it is true, that is pretty minor compared to someone who can say, "Thus saith the Lord!" It had been a good while since the days of the great prophets... people like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. But now, the crowds and the children of Jerusalem believe that the Lord has blessed them again with a prophet. He is Jesus of Nazareth.

What especially interests me in this evening's passage is the matter of sequence. It is the *combination* of Jesus entering Jerusalem with glory *and then* his immediate cleansing of the temple by driving out the money changers. Talk about someone who does not seem to know about extending an advantage, about being dealt a good hand and playing it well. Jesus just does not have good political instincts. He does not consolidate the good will of the crowds, but instead turns to something quite shocking. He drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers. He disrupted the

established ways of doing things. He no longer seems friendly, but instead, he looks stern.

Soon Jesus heals the blind and the lame who come to him in the temple. That would have been a good follow-up to his triumphant entry into Jerusalem. But intervening between these two happy events is this violent event — the overthrowing of the tables and chairs and the driving out of the temple of business people who believed about themselves that they had a legitimate right to be doing their temple dealings.

What shall we say about this sequence of events? What shall we say about this seeming lack of political instincts? Answer, we shall say that Jesus is *not* a politician, but something better. He is our Savior.

This sequence of events from triumphant entry into Jerusalem to the overthrow of the money changers to the healing of the blind and the lame illustrates the single-minded focus of Jesus. He is not interested in the praise of the crowds. Rather, he is interested in the will of his heavenly Father. Let us admire Jesus for his single-minded devotion to his mission. Nothing seems able to distract him from the work he must do.

Certainly King Herod could not distract him. Often we look askance at the Pharisees, as if they are the bad guys in the story of Jesus. But that is not always so. In this story of King Herod, that king has beheaded John the Baptist, and some Pharisees come to Jesus to warn him that Herod means to kill him too. But Jesus is not distracted from his work. The Bible passage goes this way:

³¹At that very hour some Pharisees came, and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." ³²And he said to them, "Go and tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course. ³³Nevertheless I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following; for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem.'" (Luke 13:31-33, RSV)

We human beings need food in order to survive. Gotta have it. But for Jesus, his food was to do his work. He puts it this way:

Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work." (John 4:34, RSV)

It might be true, then, that some could say that it was not politic of Jesus to squander the enthusiasm of the crowds by driving out the merchants and overthrowing the tables of the moneychangers. But the thing about Jesus is that he simply runs on a different track. He is not concerned about political advantage. He is concerned about you! He is concerned about me.

Jesus seemed to be blessed with a sense of realism that goes beyond what we can maintain. As he saw it, our eternal fate was at play in those days. Sin, death, and the devil had us in their grip. We were lost unless Jesus could do something. And as Jesus measured things, your fate was more important to him than the praises of the crowd. You and I can just barely maintain concern for our own eternal fate, but Jesus is better at that than we are. In his book, the merchants and the moneychangers needed to be driven out. It was part of his battle to save human souls. Compared to that, the adulations of the crowd did not matter much to him. *You* are more important to him than earthly fame. And that is a reason for hope in this world, through the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.