

"Be A Sinner"

Text: Matthew 21: 1-11

12/3/2017

Martin Luther once said:

"Beware of aspiring to such purity that you will not wish to be looked upon as a sinner, or to be one. For Christ dwells only in sinners."(Letter to George Spenlein in AE-volume 48, p.12-13)

"Christ dwells only in sinners." St. Matthew says pretty much the same thing, as he presents the story of Christ's birth as being first and foremost about God's Son coming into the world to save sinners. For Matthew (like Luther), if you're a sinner (and we all are), Christmas is for you. As we begin another repentant countdown to Christmas this First Sunday in Advent, we look at the importance of being sinners ...

As we do, we return to today's Gospel and hear again St. Matthew's version of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday. Matthew writes that:

"When they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them: 'Go into the village in front of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them to Me. '"(Matthew 21:1-3)

After telling us that the disciples did exactly as Jesus had directed them, Matthew then tells us that, as Jesus made His way on the donkey into the city:

"Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. And the crowds that went before Him and that followed Him were shouting: 'Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He Who comes in the Name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest! '"(vs. 8-9)

There's a key phrase in those verses that is easy to overlook, and if we overlook it we miss-out on the point of today's Gospel. That phrase is the very first one: "When they drew near to Jerusalem ... ," It connects to a lot of what has gone on up to this point in Matthew's story of Jesus.

Back in chapter 16 of his Gospel (16 :21) Matthew shows Jesus predicting His death and resurrection to His disciples, saying that:

"From that time Jesus began to show His disciples *that He must go TO JERUSALEM*, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day."

From that moment on in Matthew's Gospel Jesus makes His way to Jerusalem, where a cross and empty tomb await. In fact, Jesus predicts to His disciples two more times along that way His suffering and death, with the last of those predictions occurring in the chapter immediately preceding that of today's Gospel, where Jesus says:

"Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death, and will hand Him over to the gentiles to mock and scourge and crucify Him, and on the third day He will be raised up."(20:18-19)

Matthew narrates for us today the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday. What he says as he does that is that Jesus enters Jerusalem in fulfillment of His overall mission to save His people from their sins (as Matthew tells us in the very first chapter of his Gospel - 1 :21). As Jesus enters Jerusalem, He enters it for the purpose of dying on a cross, to save Jerusalem, and her people, from sin. What I find interesting about that is the fact that Jesus did that for a city and a people that did NOT understand Him.

We see that from the two verses that immediately follow today's Gospel, where Matthew writes of the reaction of the city of Jerusalem to Jesus' entering it:

" ... all the city was stirred, saying: 'Who is this?' And the crowds were saying: 'This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee.'"(vs. 10-11)

You'll notice there that the city did NOT know Who Jesus was, even asking: "Who is this?" You'll also notice that the crowds, who had been following Jesus on the way, gave the answer that He was a prophet, and that's important because, in Matthew, *it's never enough to call Jesus a prophet*. Matthew's Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, as Peter confessed in his great confession earlier in Matthew (16: 16). In calling Jesus a prophet, the people showed that they did NOT understand Him or His work; they did NOT receive in faith the Savior sent to them.

And yet Jesus still rode into Jerusalem to save them from their sins; He still rode into Jerusalem to reign over her as King, knowing full well that she would later reject Him and hand Him over for death on a cross. Jesus reigned from that cross with mercy; He came to a people who did NOT understand or deserve Him, and for them He gave His life. By that we see clearly that Jesus was for sinners. Jesus is still for sinners, having come to save us from our sins even though we do NOT deserve it.

That's comforting. For people in our day misunderstand Jesus just as much as the people in Jesus' day did. Just think of the time of year we're in right now: Christmastime. So many people haven't the slightest clue what Jesus' birth was for, and yet the message of that birth, and its purpose of saving from sin, sounds forth loud and clear year after year through Christ's Church. That's part of what the season of Advent is for, as Advent calls us to repent of our sin and hope for a Savior - a Savior Who came to us on the first Christmas, and Who comes to us this Christmas, in the gifts of His Word, to save us from our sins. That same Savior will come again on the last Christmas of all Christmases, the Day of His final coming in glory, to save us from our sins once and for all. Advent reminds us of that; it reminds us that we're all sinners, and that God's Son comes to save sinners. Advent teaches us that it's important to be a sinner.

I mentioned at the beginning how Luther once said that:

"Christ dwells only in sinners."

Well several years later Luther went on to write these words, addressing the same thing, saying:

"God does not save people who are only fictitious sinners. Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly, for He is victorious over sin, death, and the world."(Letter to Philip Melanchthon in AE - volume 48, p.282)

"Sin boldly," Luther said. Luther was not saying there, of course, that one should take sin lightly and revel in it, but rather that when feeling the weight of sin, one should cast it upon the back of their Lord, trusting that He has taken care of it with His death on the cross - again:

" ... believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly, ... "

Often we make excuses for our sins, focusing the attention instead on the sins of others. Or we may deny our sin altogether; we spin our deeds and words to make them look better than they actually are. Luther says to beware of that; again:

"Beware of aspiring to such purity that you will not wish to be looked upon as a sinner, or to be one. For Christ dwells only in sinners."

Luther must've read the Gospel of Matthew, for he saw so clearly the need to be honest about his sin, and to trust in Christ's forgiveness.

Folks, be honest about your sin; don't make excuses for it, or deny it, but own up to it and remember that "Christ dwells only in sinners." *Be a sinner*. Prepare for Christmas by confessing your sins, and then receive God's forgiveness in the Absolution and Supper of Jesus. Christmas is for you, *if you 're a sinner*. So be one, and be forgiven.

On that note we conclude. Ya know, Matthew writes later on in his Gospel - in the chapter right before that of today's Gospel, actually - that Jesus came:

" ... to give His life as a ransom for many."(20:28)

That's what Christmas is about. It's what Advent reminds us of, so that we can celebrate Christmas correctly, so that we can celebrate Christmas as the coming of the Savior from sin. Be in need of being saved this Christmas folks, and you will be. Be a sinner, and be forgiven -

- In Jesus' † Name,

Amen!