Historical Commentary

The Liturgy Letter

Palm Sunday - Year A

Commentary on Matthew 21:1-11 from Selected Church Fathers and Calvin

Chrysostom: He had often entered Jerusalem before, but never with so much at stake. Why were earlier visits different? They came early in the dispensation, when he was not very well known. The time of his Passion had not drawn near. He mixed in without distinction, keeping his identity under wraps. Had he appeared in this mode earlier, he would not have been held in high esteem. He would only have excited them to greater anger. But by now he had given them sufficient proof of his miraculous power. The cross was at the door. He now makes himself more conspicuous. He does not hesitate to do things that were likely to inflame them. All this happens with dramatic impact. It might have been possible for these things to have been done earlier, but it was neither profitable or expedient.

Severus: It is again a prophecy, that of Zechariah, just as that also found in the book of Matthew, which informs us that a donkey's foal was tied to its mother. For the prophecy reads, "Rejoice greatly, daughter of Zion, shout, daughter of Jerusalem; behold, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation; he himself is humble and mounted on a donkey and on a newly born foal." Now who doesn't, while waiting for a righteous king, immediately understand that the Christ is in view, who prefigured likewise the name of Melchizedek, whose name in translation evokes the "king of justice"? So the prophet himself does not only say "king of justice," but he added "and redeemer." He did so in order to indicate, in an additional way through this means, the name of Jesus, which when translated means "salvation of God" and "healing." And he added next, "He himself is humble and mounted on a donkey and on a newly born foal." He does so to show in advance he who is written about in the Gospels: "Learn of me, for I am gentle and humble of heart." Now there was never any king, simultaneously just, a redeemer, gentle and seated on a donkey, who came to Jerusalem, unless this is he who alone is King of kings, God and Redeemer, Jesus. He is kind, gentle and abundant in mercy for all those who call

upon him, as it is written.

Hilary of Poitiers: All of these circumstances surrounding his appearance point to the shape of the future. By means of parabolic signs and by the conditions of present things, the form of the future is here suggested. The Lord is taking possession of the nations! His brightness is approaching! He is occupying the minds of the nations—just as the rider of a beast. He is proclaimed by the entire army of his retinue of patriarchs, prophets and apostles. The patriarchs are spreading their garments, which signify their glory, under the Lord. By their generations, names and struggles, the Lord was prophesied. Going to him with all the ornaments of their own worthiness and scattering themselves under his seat, they will show that all their glory had been laid beneath him in preparation for his coming. The prophets are spreading their own garments under the route of the one who is coming. They predicted this path long ago. They knew that the nations would uphold God. Many had died and offered themselves to stoning. They, in a certain sense, stripped their very bodies and offered their garments upon this path. The apostles are scattering the branches from the cut trees after casting their garments. This is not simply an act of human piety. It might at first seem that the branches might impede the one who is proceeding and might make the journey of the one who is hastening more difficult and entangled. Yet even in this the reasoning of the prophets is preserved and the form of the future announced. These branches are the fruitless nations, or the fruits of the oftentimes faithless nations. These branches are scattered under the route of the Lord by the apostles. They are preparing for the entry of the Savior.

Hilary of Poitiers: Is this the crowd who would applaud his crucifixion? How was their hatred earned from his grace? Even the words of their commendation pointed to the power of redemption. “Hosanna” in Hebrew signifies the redemption of the house of David. They are calling upon the Son of David. They are celebrating the inheritance of the eternal kingdom. They are proclaiming blessing in the name of the Lord. Soon their shouting of “Crucify him!” would be blasphemy. But at present, the deeds he was doing were exhibiting the form of the future. It is granted that the crowd was doing these things with very confused emotions. The things that would follow would be different. Nevertheless they were, inadvertently and without willing it, pointing to heavenly things unfolding. In this way the whole city of Jerusalem was stirred.

Severus: Indeed, on the one hand, the fact that the donkey walks on the branches and leaves of palm trees would make it clearly known that not only he who was mounted upon it but also those who would believe in him were going to subdue all their enemies, trample them under their feet and win a glorious victory. For the branches and leaves of palm trees are the emblems of the victory. On the other hand, the fact that the people took off their coats and threw them on the ground was a proclamation—in an immediate and manifest fashion—to speak of what appeared in reality in the events that followed.

Indeed, when these believers were ridding themselves of all they possessed and even of their clothes, which is a sketch in miniature, they were following the gospel of grace. For it is written in the book of Acts that "all who were owners of land and houses, when they sold them, took the money from what had been sold and laid it at the feet of the apostles, and one gave to each according to his need." If this were not so, if there were not things mysteriously prefigured in what was coming to pass, the branches and the clothes would have even become an obstacle for the progress of this donkey, by impeding its feet like nets. "And the crowd that went ahead of him and those that followed were shouting, 'Hosanna to the Son of David.' " This phrase (namely, "Hosanna to the Son of David"), in passing from the Hebrew language to the Greek language, is translated as "praise, or a psalm, to the Son of David." As for Jesus, it does not suit a man to be honored or praised by a psalm. But such does suit him alone who is by nature God, as it is said: "He has placed in my mouth a new song, praise to our God" and "I will sing to my God, as long as I live."

And those who were crying out still added this: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest." And certainly it would have been necessary that those who were praising spoke according to custom: "You are the good one who has come." He is like the one who came a first time, or like the ancients greeting the prophet Samuel, asking from the outset, "Do you come in peace, O seer?"

For Jesus' part, the fact that they were crying out "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest" (Luke as well added, "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest") is the act of those who proclaim his second coming, by which he will come from the heavens with glory. After his coming "he will join by peace earthly things to heavenly things" when "he will likewise judge all the earth with justice," and he will bring into the kingdom of heaven those who have lived well. This is why indeed it was also very

small children who were praising and crying out like this. They were those who entered into the temple with him, for Jesus himself says, “Truly, I say to you, unless you change and become like one of these little children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Consider still the branches as bearers of victory, by which those who were acclaiming him were honoring the one who was praised in a manner worthy of God. Therefore the Evangelists wrote that already, when he approached and was ready to descend from the Mount of Olives, the crowd began to welcome him and walk in front of him, to praise him and cut branches from the trees. The Evangelists clearly show that these branches were from olive trees. They had to be olive branches because they were growing on the mountain named the Mount of Olives.

Now the olive plant indicates the reconciliation of God and his loving advent to be with us. He accomplished this not because of our righteousness, which did not even exist, but because of his mercy. In the same way indeed it is a dove holding and carrying in its beak the leaves of an olive tree who likewise signaled the end of the flood in the days of Noah and the ceasing of wrath by the mercy of peace which comes from on high.

Chrysostom: Even when the crowds grasped that something great was happening, their inward thoughts remained uninformed, lowly, unworthy and lacking in understanding. But Jesus did these things in their presence not to display pomp but as I have said, to fulfill prophecy, teach self-denial and to comfort his disciples, who were grieving for his death. He was showing them that he would suffer all these things willingly. Mark well the accuracy of the prophets, how they foretold all these things, some from David’s psalms, some from Zechariah. They had proclaimed them beforehand.

John Calvin: Matthew 21:1. Then Jesus sent two disciples Jesus sends his disciples to bring an ass to him, not because he was wearied with the journey, but for a different reason; for, in consequence of the time of his death being at hand, he intended to show, by a solemn performance, what was the nature of his kingdom. He had begun, indeed, to do this at his baptism, but it remained that this demonstration should be given by him towards the end of his calling: for why did he hitherto refrain from the title of King, and now at length openly declare himself to be a King, but because he is not far from the end

of his course? So then, as his removal to heaven was at hand, he intended to commence his reign openly on earth.

This would have been a ridiculous display, if it had not been in accordance with the prediction of Zechariah, (9:9.) In order to lay claim to the honors of royalty, he enters Jerusalem, riding an ass. A magnificent display, truly! more especially when the ass was borrowed from some person, and when the want of a saddle and of accouterments compelled the disciples to throw their garments on it, which was mark of mean and disgraceful poverty. He is attended, I admit, by a large retinue; but of what sort of people? Of those who had hastily assembled from the neighboring villages. Sounds of loud and joyful welcome are heard; but from whom? From the very poorest, and from those who belong to the despised multitude. One might think, therefore, that he intentionally exposed himself to the ridicule of all. But as he had two things to do at the same time, — as he had to exhibit some proof of his kingdom, and to show that it does not resemble earthly kingdoms, and does not consist of the fading riches of this world, it was altogether necessary for him to take this method.

2. Go into the village. As he was at Bethany, he did not ask for an ass to relieve the fatigue of traveling; for he could easily have performed the rest of the journey on foot. But as kings are wont to ascend their chariots, from which they may be easily seen, so the Lord intended to turn the eyes of the people on himself, and to place some mark of approbation on the applauses of his followers, lest any might think that he unwillingly received the honor of a king.

5. Say to the daughter of Zion. This is not found, word for word, in Zechariah; but what God commanded one Prophet to proclaim, the Evangelist justly and appropriately applies to all godly teachers; for the only hope, on which the children of God ought both to build and to rely, was, that the Redeemer would at length come. Accordingly, the Prophet shows that the coming of Christ yields to believers a full and complete ground of joy; for, since God is not reconciled to them in any other way than through the agency of the Mediator, and as it is the same Mediator who delivers his people from all evils, what can there be, apart from him, that is fitted to cheer men ruined by their sins, and oppressed by troubles? And as we must be altogether overwhelmed with grief when Christ is absent, so on the other hand, the Prophet reminds believers that, when the Redeemer is present

with them, they ought to be perfectly joyful. Now though he bestows on Christ other commendations — namely, that he is just, and having salvation — Matthew has taken but a single portion, which applied to the object he had in view, which is, that Christ will come, poor or meek; or in other words, that he will be unlike earthly kings, whose apparel is very magnificent and costly. Another mark of poverty is added, that he will ride on an ass, or the foal of an ass; for there can be no doubt that the manner of riding which belongs to the common people is contrasted with royal splendor.

9. Hosanna to the Son of David. This prayer is taken from Psalm 118:25. Matthew relates expressly the Hebrew words, in order to inform us, that these applauses were not rashly bestowed on Christ, and that the disciples did not utter without consideration the prayers which came to their lips, but that they followed with reverence the form of prayer, which the Holy Spirit had prescribed to the whole Church by the mouth of the Prophet. For, though he speaks there of his own kingdom, yet there is no reason to doubt that he principally looks, and intends others to look, to the eternal succession, which the Lord had promised to him. He drew up a perpetual form of prayer, which would be observed, even when the wealth of the kingdom was decayed; and therefore it was a prevailing custom, that prayers for the promised redemption were generally presented in these words. And the design of Matthew was, as we have just hinted, to quote in Hebrew a well-known psalm, for the purpose of showing that Christ was acknowledged by the multitude as a Redeemer. The pronunciation of the words, indeed, is somewhat changed; for it ought rather to have been written, Hoshiana, (הושיע נא) Save now, we beseech thee; but we know that it is scarcely possible to take a word from one language into another, without making some alteration in the sound. Nor was it only the ancient people whom God enjoined to pray daily for the kingdom of Christ, but the same rule is now laid down for us. And certainly, as it is the will of God to reign only in the person of his Son, when we say, May thy kingdom come, under this petition is conveyed the same thing which is expressed more clearly in the psalm. Besides, when we pray to God to maintain his Son as our King, we acknowledge that this kingdom was not erected by men, and is not upheld by the power of men, but remains invincible through heavenly protection.