

## "THE TEMPORARY TRIUMPH OF JESUS"

### INTRODUCTION

When Jesus rode into the city of Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday long ago, the people treated him like a King. They spread their garments in his way as they would for royalty. They cut down branches from the trees and waved them as they would if they were welcoming a conquering hero. They shouted, "Hosanna in the highest" which in English would probably be equivalent to something like "God save the King".....Jesus was King of Jerusalem that day!

### DEVELOPMENT

We know, of course, that Jesus never made any pretense to be a king in the usual sense of the word. He had no throne, no army, no retinue of servants; he wore no crown, carried no sword, presided over no court or parliament. He had no political ambitions whatsoever and when he stood before Pilate and Pilate asked him if he were king of the Jews, he tried to make clear what kind of king he was by saying, "MY kingdom is not of this world."

We also know that there was from the very beginning an imperious quality about Jesus. When he went up to young men whom he had chosen to be his apprentices and said to them, "Follow me", they followed! And when he talked to the people and said to them, "The law that you have heard all of your lives says thus and so, but I say to you such and such".....they listened. People were possessed by evil spirits according to the interpretation of the time, that is, they were deranged, they were people with mental diseases and neuroses, and when Jesus went up and commanded these so-called devils to come out of them, they did. There was then about Jesus, this imperious quality - this note of authority - this capacity to command in such a way to make men listen and obey.

We know that and we also know that there were some people who from the very beginning recognized this and responded to it - this that we might call the royal character of Jesus. However, most people did not. And it's a sad thing how many people missed the splendor of that life that was right in front of their eyes. They saw him only as a wandering preacher, with strange ideas, unusual ways, but someone who would be forgotten in the next few years. But there were a few who listened and followed and now as he rode into Jerusalem, his friends from Galilee, the little country up north, gathered around him and hailed him as a King, shouting out their praises, "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord".

As we look at this very familiar story, we see (as perhaps we have never seen before) that this was a moment of temporary triumph. And I think that if you care anything at all about Jesus that you will rejoice in your heart that at least he had this moment of temporary triumph in his earthly life.....that he did hear the shouts of the people who sincerely and gladly and honestly welcomed him as the king over their whole life.

### TEMPORARY TRIUMPHS BEFORE

Jesus had had temporary triumphs before, to be sure. When he healed sick people, the Gospels say, that came to him from all quarters because he had an extraordinary power to communicate the vitality of God that made people well and strong and, as he touched people

and made them well, he stood there temporarily triumphant over the forces of disease and death. And when he preached to the multitude, he spoke with a sort of simplicity and downrightness, quite unlike the formal and conventional preaching of the clergy that they had heard all of their lives, not simply resting upon the authority of quoted texts, but resting upon the authority of reality. And the people literally hung on his every word so that you could say he had moments here and there of temporary triumph.

He was surrounded, however, for the most part by all sorts of defeats and disappointments. You know what they were: people didn't really understand him, even his own family didn't know what he was up to. The religious leaders of the day completely outlawed him from their circles. They were opposed to him from the very beginning. Even his own friends didn't quite catch on to what he was saying until after he had been crucified. But in spite of all these defeats, there were these little spots of light, these temporary triumphs.

But the greatest of all, of course, was this one brief hour when he rode into the city of Jerusalem, not as a conquering hero, but rather as the saviour of mankind. For one brief hour, his simplicity triumphed over all of the pomp and circumstances of the kings and the queens. For one brief hour, his humility of spirit triumphed over all the presumptuousness of royalty. For one brief hour, his spirit triumphed over the selfishness of the world. For one brief hour, his moral power triumphed over the power of armies, and weapons. For one brief hour, his absolute, downright honesty triumphed over the devious ways of men, and his love over the lust for power. Now it may have been only a temporary triumph, for it led right into the hands of the enemy; it played their game, it gave them their opportunity, and the triumph ultimately ended in the darkness of Good Friday.

#### TEMPORARY TRIUMPHS HAVE CONTINUED

These temporary triumphs of Jesus have continued across the centuries. The world is not organized according to the principles of Jesus, and I think that we would be absolutely unrealistic, all of us who meet here today, to enjoy and participate in this Palm Sunday service, if we assumed that it were. The world as we live in it is organized on the basis of power politics, and competition and aggression, and nothing we can say or think or hope can alter that fact. But if it is true that the world as a whole is not organized on the principles of Jesus, it is also true that individual lives often are and in those lives in which the spirit of Christ has come alive, in those lives you see repeated these temporary triumphs of Jesus, these breaks of light in the darkness of the world. Rufus Jones speaks of these people as "lighted lives", and the light that is in them, of course, is none other than the light that is in Christ. It shines out every now and then sometimes when you least expect it, and it splits the darkness.

All of us, I'm sure, can think of illustrations. Lincoln, to my way of thinking towers above every other American. The shot that killed him represented the poisoned arrows that came invisibly from the minds of thousands of Americans of his day who rejected him secretly because he was too magnanimous toward the south. Above

see no prospect that the world is coming to a time when the triumph of Jesus will be permanent, when the spirit that was His, that was so graciously and enthusiastically hailed on Palm Sunday will prevail in the highways and byways of the world.

But there are two or three things to say, and I want to say them as briefly as I can in the time that is left. The first is this: these temporary triumphs are more frequent than we sometimes think. The illustrations I put before you were taken from the lives of famous persons you all know, but think what a list we ~~we~~ <sup>who</sup> could make if we added the names of ordinary men and women in the midst of all of the confusion and disquietude of life live heroically in the spirit of Jesus and triumph from time to time over the resisting mediums in which they live and work. I could name many instances of ordinary men and women, and I'm sure you could, too. These temporary triumphs of the spirit of Jesus in the world are more frequent than we sometimes think.

The second thing that ought to be said is this, and this is a solemn note. Our lives, in the long run, will be judged by the frequency of those triumphs. I have not tried to point this to you through the sermon, but I have been hoping that you have been taking it to yourself and asking yourself: when was the last time I so behaved under difficult circumstances that someone looking at me would say, well, Christ hasn't triumphed over the world as a whole, but there at least is one of the temporary triumphs of Jesus in the world. When is the last time that could have been said of you. Our lives, in the long run, will be judged by the frequency of those triumphs of Jesus in us over the forces and factors in the world that threaten to pull us down.

The third thing is this, that one such triumph offsets a hundred defeats. This, of course, does not minimize in any way the seriousness of a defeat, nor excuse us when we slump into a defeat, but it is true that one such triumph offsets a hundred defeats... one man who does something because it is right and not because it will win votes....one person who is honest without any thought of what will happen to himself.....one person, no matter how obscure he or she may be, who is willing to let the spirit of Christ live in him, the spirit of love and good will and honesty, will roll back the clouds of darkness for days to come. Such a triumph will offset a thousand defeats that scoundrels and sinners have made.

CLOSING Each year, as we come around to Palm Sunday, I cannot help but feel that there is an infinite sadness about the day.....it's a strange kind of day in which sadness is mingled with joy.....deep sadness of something glorious and beautiful rejected and refused. There they were, on the threshold of life, yet they refused to go in. So near and yet so far. So wise, and yet so foolish. And to increase to the sadness, the rejection has continued across the years. Person after person, nation after nation, have not been willing to make the necessary changes in order to accept the rule of God.

And yet mingled with the sadness of that day, there is still some of the joy of that first Palm Sunday - for the royal and majestic figure of Christ still somehow mysteriously goes on before. In spite of rejection after rejection, that royal figure still goes on before us - challenging our hopes, haunting our dreams, probing our consciences, stimulating our spirits. And after all these years, after all of these failures on our part to accept what he has to give us, he still makes the promise:

If you are willing to submit to the rule of God, God will give you new life; but the rule of God is the rule of love, and you cannot have the life unless you are willing to love.

Will you accept that?

Will you take the chance.

That is the offer, that is the promise, and the responsibility for a decision rests upon the heart of each person.

Once to every man and nation,  
Comes the moment to decide.  
In the strife of truth with falsehood  
For the good or evil side.

Some great cause, God's new messiah,  
Offering each the bloom or blight,  
And the choice goes by forever,  
'Twixt that darkness and that light"

LET US PRAY:

As we try to follow our Lord and Master into the city where he was hailed as king, help us, O God, to show forth in our lives something of his incomparable spirit, that people seeing us, may be renewed in confidence and courage and know that once again thou hast triumphed. Amen