

WORKS OF ROBERT CROUSE

Memory and Hope for the 21st century



UNPUBLISHED SERMONS SERIES

A Sermon for the First Sunday in Advent

Romans 11:8-14 & St. Matthew 21:1-13

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout with gladness, O daughter of Jerusalem: Behold, thy king cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation: Lowly, and riding upon an ass, upon a colt, the foal of an ass. He shall banish the chariot from Ephraim, and the horse from Jerusalem, and the battle bow shall be banished. He shall speak peace to the nations...turn ye to the stronghold, ye prisoners of hope.

Zechariah 9:9-11

This passage from the Book of Zechariah, the great prophet of national restoration, is used by St. Matthew in today's Gospel to explain the peculiar circumstances of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Several centuries before Christ, Zechariah prophesied the advent of a humble king, "lowly and riding upon an ass"; a king who would bring liberty and peace to the city. The chariots and horses, and the weapons of battle would be banished, and the "prisoners of hope" - those who longed for the city's salvation - would come to see their hope fulfilled. "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion: Behold, thy king cometh."

Zechariah, and others among the prophets, looked for a Messiah to come, and throughout the Gospel records, it is everywhere clear that Jesus identified himself with that expectation.

When John the Baptist heard in the prison the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples, and said unto him, "Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?" Jesus answered and said unto them, "Go and show John again those things which ye do hear and see: The



blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached unto them.”

The signs of the Messiah are fulfilled.

And now, in today’s Gospel, as Jesus enters the holy city, amidst the crowds assembling for the Passover festival, those signs are once again unmistakably fulfilled.

He comes as the promised king, “lowly, and riding upon an ass”, and the crowds cry out their recognition: “Hosanna to the Son of David: Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.” “And when he was come into Jerusalem, all the city was moved, saying, ‘Who is this?’” This prophet from Nazareth has come to claim his throne, and he goes to the very heart of the city, to claim his temple as the house of prayer. And, of course, we all know what came of this: the throne is a cross on a barren hill outside the city’s gates. Thus, he keeps the Passover feast of liberty, and from that throne he reigns and triumphs through all the ages of eternity. The chariots of Ephraim and the horses of Jerusalem, and the battle bows are finally of no avail against the power of divine love: “he reigns and triumphs from the tree.”

He is indeed the promised Messiah, but what a strange salvation it is! What a strange liberation, what an incomprehensible peace, what a peculiar kingdom! The “prisoners of hope” in every age look for redemption, and seek a Messiah. But we look for redemption in a change of circumstances; we look for a miracle, a religious miracle, an economic miracle, a political miracle, a military miracle.

Hear the words of the prophet Zechariah: “The Lord shall be seen over them, and his arrow shall go forth as the lightning; and the Lord God shall blow the trumpet, and shall go with the whirlwinds of the south.” The Lord does come, and there is indeed a miracle: not a miracle of chariots and horses, of swords and arrows; no trumpets and whirlwinds. The Lord does come, but as the humble king, “lowly and riding upon an ass.” And there is a miracle: the miracle of inner transformation. “His arrow shall go forth as the lightning”, but his is the lightning which pierces to the deep recesses of the heart, to refine and purify. He does indeed establish a kingdom, but not a kingdom bounded by any time or place: his is the kingdom of the pure in heart, for all times and all places. His power is the stupendous and ultimately unconquerable power of love.

“Behold thy king cometh unto thee.” Our story is the story of Palm Sunday, and perhaps it seems strange that we read it on Advent Sunday. Among all the churches of Christendom, only the English Church—already in the Middle Ages, long before the Reformation—chose this Gospel lesson for Advent Sunday. And the choice is singularly appropriate. Advent prepares us for

Christmas, and what we must be prepared to see is precisely the humble king, the infant king, outwardly of little account, in circumstances of abject poverty. We must be prepared to see, naked of all outward glory, the power of divine love, that power which can and does transform our lives at a level which no chariots and horses, nor their more potent modern equivalents, can ever reach.

That is a fact which we all know perfectly well, of course. Even to speak of it seems almost to belabour a platitude. And yet, how little do we trust that fact! It seems to me that in the name of practicality we look for redemption almost everywhere else. We look for trumpets and whirlwinds, but they do not herald salvation. We look for chariots and horses, but they do not change men's hearts. All that is an empty dream. The Advent message is timely and urgent. "High time it is to wake up from those dreams", says St. Paul. "Owe no man anything but to love one another." Nothing but love, he tells us; not sentimental feelings, mind you, but love: the quiet and steadfast willing of the good. That is the armour of light, and by God's grace, we had better wake up and put it on.

For many people, Christmas is the great annual disappointment: it comes in a flurry of sentiment, and nothing much seems to be changed; life goes on in the same old way. But what change do we expect? Trumpet or whirlwind? The change must be in us, and much depends upon Advent. Are we ready to hail the humble monarch? Are we prepared to see beyond the sentiment of Christmas? Are we ready to cast off the dreams of darkness, and adore the mystery of love? The lessons of Advent are to prepare us for that—to open our minds and hearts to discern and adore that miracle and to be transformed by it.

"Turn ye to the stronghold, ye prisoners of hope."

Prisoners of hope, we look for salvation. God grant us eyes to see it in the mystery of his coming.

Amen.

This sermon was preached by Father Dr. Robert Crouse on the first Sunday in Advent in 1979 at a suburban church in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. The Epistle and Gospel readings are from the Canadian 1962 Book of Common Prayer.