

Palm Sunday - APRIL 12/March 30, 2009

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Today as we come together in this Divine Liturgy, we remain in the afterglow of yesterday's celebration. We welcome into the church six newly illumined souls aflame with God's love: John, Nina, Hanna, Marina, Nicholetta, and Michael. Each one with a name that bespeaks of sanctity and charity and God's over-flowing Grace. As each one of them bears a name of a saint, they also bear a great responsibility to be pillars of light and virtue. This is a difficult task.

We should rejoice with Christ's joy and remember that to follow Him has never been easy. For 2000 years, countless faithful souls have walked with our Lord, in this walk of Holy Week.

In today's gospel, we observe the lives of a few of these faithful disciples. In Bethany, in the home of Simon the Leper, we join the community gathered around our Lord where something had just happened for the first time in human history: in this small village of Bethany, near to Jerusalem, a man had been raised from the dead. A man whose flesh was actually decomposing and stinking, a good friend of our Lord's, Lazarus, by name.

Jesus was a close friend of this family – Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha. Thus it was natural that he should decide to spend some of his last days with them. He was a valued friend of their family, as we hope He would be a valued friend of each person here.

The feelings they must have had are far beyond our ordinary comprehension. The Lord had saved their family in the raising of Lazarus. Then He had withdrawn to the wilderness, to Ephraim, to avoid the wrath of those Jewish leaders, who wanted to kill Him, especially for the raising of Lazarus, an unclean person.

When the Lord returned from Ephraim, He came to the house of Simon the Leper, one of Lazarus' neighbors. He sat with him at the table. One of them raised from the dead, and the other raised from living death. We are called to remember in this, that Christ saves us daily from the corruption of the earth and the leprosy of our lives, when they are ruled by the passions.

It was here, in the house of Simon, who had been a leper, that Mary, the sister of Lazarus, took a pound of very costly spikenard, broke it over his head, and as a measure of her respect for Him, also anointed His feet. This was a gift of the heart, more than the pocketbook. It was her way of attempting to express her deep appreciation for raising her beloved brother, Lazarus. The other sister, Martha, expressed her love and appreciation to the Lord, by helping with the cooking and serving of the meal.

Lazarus, Mary and Martha shared more than a family connection; they were part of Christ's community. They supported Him in His ministry, rejoiced in Him and all three of them knew the hour of His visitation. For them and for us, the hour of His visitation means joining with our

Lord in the incredible difficulty of His Ministry and in the extreme challenge of living in such a way to be preparing to live in the Kingdom He offers us.

Simon the Leper shares something with Lazarus, Mary and Martha. In his healing and in his faithfulness afterwards, as a member of the community around our Lord, he also knew the hour of his visitation and he did not lose his moment.

Fr. Alexander Men tells of an elderly man whom he knew. His life was gray and dull, void of anything spiritual. Yet, once in his youth, as he walked along a city street, a wonderful inner light dazzled him and the whole world was lit up by the Presence of God, as if there were no dividing line between earth and heaven. Clearly, this was a call from God and visitation from the Lord. Years went by and this experience was left behind, forgotten. He was overcome by worldly preoccupation's and cares. He never returned to the One Who called him. He did not know the hour of his visitation.

Isn't his how it often is in our lives? We have wonderful experiences in our youth, and think we can always come back to it. But the doorways that are opened by the Grace of God, are closed by our indifference, or by our worldly and prideful interpretation.

Today we celebrate Christ's entry into Jerusalem - an entry marked by people proclaiming Him as king - king of an earthly kingdom. Jesus sees the people and He weeps for them and for their children. The adulation they give Him at His entry, is soon forgotten and is engulfed in the bitterness and strife of those in leadership. Through all this, Christ remains quietly what He was and is. Not a worldly triumph does He offer us, but a place to stand, next to Him, as the world continues its passion for destruction.

Our Lord comes to the gates of Jerusalem today, at the gates of our hearts, that we might be like Lazarus, Mary, Martha and Simon the Leper - that we might be joined together in the community that supports the ministry of our Lord and walk with Him, not just to the gates of Jerusalem, but to Gethsemane, to Golgotha. And to the very gates of life itself, Christ's resurrection.