

Palm Sunday - Entrance into Jerusalem

John 12:1-18

*From The Explanation of the Gospel of St. John
by Blessed Theophylact, Archbishop of Ochrid and Bulgaria*

1-3. Then Jesus six days before the Pascha came to Bethany, where Lazarus was who had been dead, whom He raised from the dead. There they made Him a supper; and Martha served: but Lazarus was one of them that sat at the table with Him. Then took Mary a pound of myrrh of spikenard, very costly, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair: and the house was filled with the fragrance of the myrrh.

On the tenth day of the month the Jews take the sheep which will be slaughtered for the Pascha, and from that time they begin the preparations for the feast. Therefore, *six days before the Pascha*, which is the ninth day of the month, they make a bountiful dinner which they consider a prelude to the feast. Coming to Bethany, Jesus also dines. To emphasize the great miracle of the raising of Lazarus the Evangelist says, *Lazarus was one of them that sat at the table with Him*. Having appeared from the tomb alive, he did not soon return to death, but remained among them a long time, eating, drinking, and living a normal life. By saying that *Martha served*, the Evangelist indicates that the dinner was in her house. Behold the faith of this woman, who did not permit servants to do the serving, but herself performed this duty. Paul says of the widow who was *well reported of for good works*, "*if she have washed the feet of the saints.*" [I Tim. 5:10] Martha, then, serves all, but Mary reserves her honor for Christ alone, attending to Him not as a man but as God. She poured out the myrrh and wiped His feet with her hair, not regarding Him a mere man, as did many of the others, but Master and Lord. *Maria* can be understood allegorically to mean that which leads upwards to the divinity of the Father and Lord [*kyrios*] of all. For *Maria* means "mistress ruler" [*kyria*]. Thus the Ruler of all, the Divinity of the Father, has anointed Jesus' feet, signifying the flesh of the Lord in the last times, namely, God the Word, with the oil of the Spirit. As David says, *Wherefore God, Thy God, hath anointed Thee with the oil of gladness.* [Ps. 44:6] And the great Peter says, *Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ.* [Acts 2:36] The Flesh, assumed by the Word, and anointed by the divine Spirit Which entered the Virgin's womb, became what the Word is--God. And It filled the world with fragrance, just as the house was filled with the fragrance of Mary's myrrh. What meaning do we see in the hairs which wiped the feet? They represent the saints who the adorn the head of God and His supreme authority. Existing for the glory of God, they may be called His adornment and have become fellow sharers in the anointing of Christ's Flesh. Hence David says [in the Psalm quoted above], *more than Thy fellows.* And Paul says to the Corinthians, *Now He Who establisheth us with you in Christ, and hath anointed us, is God.* [I Cor. 1:21] We know that throughout

the world those who live according to Christ are called "Christs." (1) Therefore the hairs that wiped Jesus' feet represent Christians, who share in the divine anointing. Just as hair is something dead, so too those who belong to Christ are dead. They have crucified the flesh, mortified their members that are on the earth, and died to the world. [See Gal. 5:24.] Hair is the adornment and glory of the head--the saints are the glory of God, their light shines before men, and the Father is glorified by them. [See Mt. 5:16.] Even their eating and drinking is to the glory of God, Whom they glorify in their members. And for you, O reader, Jesus has also resurrected your fallen mind like another Lazarus, and you have received Him into the house of your soul, and that which is risen feasts together with Him. Therefore anoint the feet of the Lord *six days before the Pascha*, before the dawning of the Pascha of the age to come, while you still live in this world which was fashioned in six days. The feet of Christ are the Apostle [Book] and the Gospel, in a word, His commandments. By these Christ walks in us. To these commandments bring *myrrh*, namely, a disposition composed of many virtues, of which the finest is faith as warm and pungent as costly spikenard. If you do not show a fervent, zealous and virtuous bond to Christ's commandments, and wipe them with your mortified members, as with hair, taking them to yourself, you will not be able to make your house fragrant. The Lord's feet are also the least brethren, in whom Christ walks to each man's door asking for what is needed. Anoint these too with the myrrh of almsgiving. There are many who give alms, but make a show of doing so, and thereby gain nothing. For *they have their reward* in this world. [Mt. 6:2] Wipe the feet [of these brethren] with the hair of your head and receive the benefit in your soul, and gather the reward of almsgiving in that principal and governing part of a man. If there is a part of you that is dead and lifeless, like hair, anoint it with this good chrism. For it is written, "Blot out your sins with almsgiving." [See Dan. 4:24.]

4-8. Then saith one of His disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, who would betray Him, Why was not this myrrh sold for three hundred pence, and given to the poor? This he said, not that he cared for the poor; but because he was a thief, and held the bag, and bare what was put therein. Then said Jesus, Let her alone: against the day of My burying hath she done this. For the poor always ye have with you; but Me ye have not always.

Being a lover of money, Judas criticizes Mary's way of showing honor. What he is saying is, "Why did you not offer Him money (so that I could steal it) instead of myrrh?" How can it be that another Evangelist says that all the disciples asked this question? [Mt. 26:8-9] We may say that all the disciples did speak these words, but the others did not share Judas' disposition. The Lord does not rebuke him although He knew that he spoke with a thieving mind. He wished to avoid shaming him, thus teaching us also to be patient and long suffering with such individuals. But in a veiled manner He does chide him for his treachery and willingness to betray Him to death out of love of money. He mentions His burial to wound Judas' unfeeling heart with a pang of conscience, in order to

correct him if at all possible. His next words have the same purpose: "*the poor always ye have with you; but Me ye have not always*, because in a little while I will go away, since you are plotting My death. If I am annoying to you and the honor shown to Me grieves you, wait a short while and you will be free of Me; then you will know if it was indeed for the poor that you needed the sale of the myrrh." If Judas was in fact a lover of money and a thief, why did the Lord give him control of the purse? For the very reason that he was a thief, so that he could not use his love of money as an excuse for his betrayal. He had sufficient consolation for his weakness from handling the purse, but despite this he was not faithful. He *bare*, which means, carried off and stole, *what was put therein*, committing sacrilege by taking for himself what had been given for godly purposes. (Let plunderers of sacred things take note whose fate they share.) But the culmination of his wickedness was that he betrayed the Lord. Do you see where love of money leads? To betrayal. Well does Paul call it *the root of all evil*, since it lead, in this case, to betrayal of the Lord, and in every other instance does exactly the same. [I Tim. 6:10] Some say that Judas was entrusted with the ministry of the funds because it was lower than the other forms of serving. To care for the funds is a lesser ministry than teaching, as the Apostles say in the Book of Acts, *It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables.* [Acts 6:2]

9-11. Much people of the Jews therefore knew that He was there: and they came not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might see Lazarus also, whom He had raised from the dead. But the chief priests consulted that they might put Lazarus also to death; because that by reason of him many of the Jews went away, and believed in Jesus.

These people who came to Jesus showed good sense and judgment, as opposed to those who senselessly raged against Him. For *they came*, the Evangelist says, *not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might see Lazarus also*. Indeed, because the miracle was so astounding, many wanted to see the resurrected man, and perhaps hoped to hear something from Lazarus about the others who were with him in hades. But the Pharisees were so inhuman that they desired to kill not only Jesus, but also Lazarus, who had become the cause of salvation for many of the guileless who were lead to faith by means of the miracle worked in him. Thus the Pharisees considered the good he had experienced to be his crime. Above all they were vexed that with the great feast approaching all the people were rushing to Bethany to hear about the miracle and become eyewitnesses of the resurrected man.

12-13. On the next day much people that were come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, took branches of palm trees, and went forth to meet Him, and cried, Hosanna: Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord, the King of Israel. Jesus had first withdrawn into the desert for a while to calm the rage of those intent on His murder. Now He enters boldly into the city and appears to all. The time of His Passion is at hand, and He no longer hides, but gives Himself for the salvation of the whole world. Consider the sequence of the Passion. Saving the greatest

miracle for last, He raised Lazarus from the dead. As a result many ran to Him and believed. Because many believed, there was greater envy and rage, leading to the plot and the Cross. *When the multitude heard that Jesus was coming*, they met Him with greater glory and honor than a mere man would deserve. They no longer considered Him merely a prophet, for which prophet had their fathers ever honored in this manner? Thus they also cried out, *Hosanna: Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord*. From these words we may infer, first, that He is God. For *Hosanna* means "Save now [sson d]," as it is written in Greek in the 117th Psalm according to the Seventy. There the Hebrew *Hosanna* is rendered in Greek as *O Lord, save now*. (2) The power to save is God's alone, and to Him are addressed the words, "Save us, O Lord our God." From many passages one must conclude that Scripture attributes salvation to God alone. First of all, the Psalms of David which refer to Christ say that He is God. Furthermore, they say that He is true God. For it says here, *He that cometh*, and not, "He that is led." The latter would be the sign of a servant; the former is the sign of power and authority. The words, *in the name of the Lord*, show the same thing, that He is true God. They do not say that He comes in the name of a servant, but in the name of the Lord. They also reveal that He is not an adversary of God, but one who comes in the name of the Father, as the Lord Himself says, *I am come in My Father's name*, whereas *another shall come in His own name*. [Jn. 5:43] And they called Him *the King of Israel*, as if thinking of a physical kingdom. They were awaiting a king stronger than human nature to be raised up who would save them from the Roman power.

14-16. And Jesus, when He had found a young ass, sat thereon; as it is written, Fear not, daughter of Zion: behold, thy King cometh, sitting on the colt of an ass. These things understood not His disciples at the first: but when Jesus was glorified, then remembered they that these things were written of Him, and that they had done these things unto Him.

Why do the other Evangelists [speak of the Lord's instructions to find the young ass] and say, *Loose him and bring him hither*, while John is silent about this, saying merely, *when He had found a young ass*? [See Mt. 21:2; Mk. 11:2; and Lk. 19:30.] Do they perhaps disagree? Not at all. What the others said in more detail, John expresses in summary by saying, *when He had found a young ass*. When the disciples had untied it and brought it to Him, then He *found* it and *sat thereon*. In doing so He fulfilled the prophecy of Zechariah who said, *Fear not, daughter of Zion: behold, thy King cometh to thee, sitting on the colt of an ass*.[See Zech. 9:9.] Because most of the kings of Jerusalem were wicked and tyrannical, the prophet said, "Fear not, O Zion. The king of whom I prophesy to you will not be like the others, but meek and humble, displaying no arrogance whatsoever." This is shown by the fact that He came seated upon an ass. He did not enter the city at the head of an army, but conveyed by a donkey. His sitting upon an ass was also a symbol of things to come. Being unclean according to the law, the ass represents the uncleanness of the Gentile race, upon whom Jesus, the Word of God, sits, subduing like a colt this insubordinate

and uninstructed people, this new race, and leading it into the true Jerusalem once it has been tamed and made obedient to Him. Has the Lord not gathered the Gentiles into heaven, once they became His people and were obedient to His preaching? As for the palms, do they not indicate perhaps that He Who raised Lazarus has become the Victor over death? For palms were awarded to those who were victorious in games and contests. Perhaps they also indicate that He Who is being praised is a heavenly Being Who has come from above. Of all trees it is the palm that appears to soar upwards to the very heavens, so to speak; it bears foliage at the top, and at the peak puts out young white shoots, but the stump and the middle section of the trunk, all the way to top, are rough and hard to climb because of the sharp spines. So it is that he who strives to acquire knowledge of the Son and Word of God will find it a hard and uphill journey because of the toil of gaining virtue. But when he has arrived at the pinnacle of knowledge, he will be met, as if by the whitest palm shoots, by the bright light of divine knowledge and the revelation of ineffable things. Marvel with me, O reader, how the Evangelist is not ashamed, but boldly displays the former ignorance of the Apostles. *These things understood not His disciples at the first: but when Jesus was glorified.* By *glory* he means the Lord's Ascension after the Cross and Passion. Only then, by the coming of the Holy Spirit, did they understand *that these things were written of Him.* That these things were written, perhaps they knew; but that they referred to Jesus, they did not know, and providentially so. They would have been scandalized by His Crucifixion if [they had understood that] Scripture Itself had proclaimed Him King, and then He had suffered these things.

17-18. The people therefore that was with Him when He called Lazarus out of his grave, and raised him from the dead, bare witness. For this cause the people also met Him, for that they heard that He had done this miracle. The Pharisees therefore said among themselves, Perceive ye how ye prevail nothing? Behold, the world is gone after Him.

The Evangelist is saying that the people who saw the miracle which He worked for Lazarus were witnesses and heralds of His power. This is why He was met with glory by the people who had *heard*, that is, believed, *that He had done this miracle.* If they had not believed, they would not have congregated so swiftly.

1. "Christ" [*Christos*] means literally "the Anointed One." For the followers of Christ, instead of the usual word "Christians" [*Christianoi*] Blessed Theophylact here uses the simple plural form of "Christ," *Christoi*, to stress the close union between Christ and the members of His mystical Body, the Church.

2. *O Lord, save now; O Lord, send now prosperity. Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord. We have blessed you out of the house of the Lord. God is the Lord and has appeared unto us.* Ps. 117:25-26.