

THIS SERMON IS A REGULAR WEEKLY FEATURE

PEOPLE'S PULPIT...



Sermon by CHARLES T. RUSSELL, Pastor Brooklyn Tabernacle.

PALM SUNDAY THE LOST OPPORTUNITY

Text. "If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! But now they are hid from thine eyes" (Luke xix, 42).

Little did the Jews understand the momentous importance to them of the event which Christians commemorate on Palm Sunday. It will be remembered that the incident occurred at the close of our Lord's ministry—three and a half years after his baptism at Jordan and five days before his crucifixion. The Jewish Sabbath had been spent in rest at Bethany. Lazarus, whom Jesus awakened from the sleep of death, with his sisters Mary and Martha, prepared for Jesus a banquet, and when the Sabbath closed the supper was eaten. It was at that time that Mary brought forth the box of perfume, spikenard very valuable, and therewith anointed our Lord's head and feet. It was the same occasion on which Judas, in a wrong spirit, had snarled against this expression of her loving devotion; that it was a waste; that preferably the money should have been given to the poor. It was then that the Master defended Mary and announced that the anointing was for his burial (which occurred later the same week), and suggested to the disciples, "The poor ye have all ways with you. And whosoever ye will ye do them good; but me ye have not always."

The next morning, the first day of the week, corresponding to our Sunday, Jesus made ready for his triumphal entry into the city of Jerusalem as the Jewish King, according to the custom of the Jewish kings riding upon an ass and hailed and acclaimed by the populace. The incident had been foretold by the Prophet Zechariah in great detail, saying, "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem; behold, thy King cometh unto thee; he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass" (Zechariah ix, 9).

When the apostles had brought the ass and Jesus sat thereon, the large concourse of people (which had come from Jerusalem to see Jesus because of his awakening of Lazarus) shouted aloud. They were filled with enthusiasm and, after the manner of the time, some broke off palm branches for the ass to step upon; others laid their garments in the way and thus formed, as it were, a carpet in the road leading to Jerusalem near by. The shout of the people was just as the prophet had declared. They hailed Jesus as the promised Son of David, the Messiah long waited for. On previous occasions, when they sought to make Jesus a king, after witnessing his marvelous works, he withdrew himself from them, to wait for their ardor to cool, knowing that the Father's time was not yet due. But now he knew that his hour was come and hence, instead of hindering, he helped on with the enthusiasm by sending for the ass, etc. Prominent sectarians Jews present, although unable to account for the miracle, were unprepared to think of Jesus as the true Messiah, or anything short of an impostor in that role. When these heard the multitude shouting and addressing Jesus as the Messiah they were offended and sent word to Jesus that he should restrain the ignorant people who were thus acclaiming him.

But instead of forbidding the ovation Jesus intimated that it was the proper thing, that because the Prophet Zechariah (ix, 9) said, "Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem!" therefore there must be a shout. If the people had not shouted, rather than have the prophecy go unfulfilled, Jesus said the very stones would have cried out.

Enroute to Jerusalem Jesus halted the ass and the procession at the top of the Mount of Olives and, overlooking the Holy City, wept while he pronounced his sentences upon it—Unworthy! Unappreciative! As the evangelist declares, "Israel knew not the time of her visitation." The time for Israel to receive the King had come and they were not only ignorant of the matter collectively, but they were not in the heart condition to understand or appreciate. Jesus cried, "O Jerusalem! Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!" (Matthew xxiii, 37). For three and a half years he and his faithful apostles had been declaring that the Kingdom of God was at hand; that the people should repent and believe the good message. And even six months in advance of this John the Baptist and his disciples had similarly preached.

After those four years of faithful preaching throughout the length and breadth of Palestine, the nation was apparently as unprepared for Jesus as at the first. Hence our Lord's following words, "Therefore I say unto you, Your house is left unto you desolate: Ye shall see me no more until that day when ye shall say—Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord!" That day has not yet come. Mesitine the Jewish nation was there cast off from fellowship with God, as the prophet declares, "Because they knew not the time of their visitation."

Israel has been cast out from a favored position for more than eighteen centuries. Thank God the day is near at hand, when, at the second coming of Messiah, his Kingdom shall be turned over to them. And then, as he declares, they will be glad to say, "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord." The long centuries of persecution and separation from God's favor will have brought that people to a humbler condition of heart, where they will be glad to receive of Divine grace upon Divine terms. To this great event St. Paul refers us in Romans xi, 27-34.

Although God foreknew all that had happened the offer of the Kingdom to Israel was just as bona-fide, just as genuine, as though he had not known it. God always does his part! Whatever failure there is in any matter of conduct belongs to humanity.

If thus we have before our minds the origin of Palm Sunday and what it signified as the climax of the test of natural Israel in respect to Messiah, we are prepared to go further and to note that in God's providence there is a similar test for us Christians.

"Enemies For Your Sakes." St. John emphasized particularly the fact that the rejection of the Jewish nation, because of their rejection of Messiah, did not apply to all the individuals of that nation. As the Prophet Isaiah had foretold (Romans ix, 27-33) there was a small, faithful section or "remnant." This remnant accepted Christ and were by him accepted and became the nucleus or foundation of Spiritual Israel on the Day of Pentecost. Thus we read, "He came unto his own nation and his own received him not (as a nation); but to as many as received him, to them gave he liberty (privilege) to become sons of God, even to them that believed on his name; which were begotten not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God"—at Pentecost (John i, 11-13).

Thus so far as the spiritual part of God's great promise to Abraham is concerned it has passed from the Jewish nation; but there still remains for them a glorious earthly portion, to which they will be introduced at our Lord's second coming. Then their sins will be cancelled, and as a people the Hebrews will return to Divine favor and will inherit the earthly features of the promise made to their fathers. Then, through them, God's blessing will be extended to all nations and peoples under Israel's New Covenant, which will then become operative at the hands of their great Mediator—the Christ, the Messiah in glory. But by that time the election of the saints of this Gospel Age will be complete and the Messiah in glory will include Jesus the Head and the Church his Body—joint-heirs with him in his Kingdom—joint-heirs with him in the spiritual features of the great Abrahamic promise (Galatians iii, 29).

All this is clearly stated by the Apostle in Romans xi, 25-32. But somehow our eyes of understanding as Christians have been hidden so that, until of late, we have not seen these lengths and breadths, these heights and depths, of Divine Love and Wisdom and arrangement. The fact that we now see these things is a corroborative evidence that they are nigh at hand. Just so it was at our Lord's first advent. Many things pertaining to that time were completely hidden until the time of their fulfillment came, and then only the "Wise Virgins" were so blessed, so assisted, that they trimmed their lamps effectively and were enabled to see these beauties in the Divine Plan.

The Time of Our Visitation. Apparently very few of God's people, until recently, have noted the fact that Spiritual Israel has had a parallel history to that of Natural Israel. Few have seen that these are dealt with all through the Scriptures as type and antitype. Few have noticed that from the death of Jacob to the death of Jesus finds its exact parallel of 1,845½ years between the death of Jesus and our day. Few have noticed that in both cases there is a nominal and a real Israel. The nominal Jewish system was tried and all but the "Israelites indeed" failed. Likewise will be the experience of Spiritual Israel. The nominal Christian system will be tried, and all will fail except the spirit-begotten and faithful. As only a remnant or small number were found in the proper condition at the first advent, so the Scriptures clearly intimate that only a small number will be found sufficiently salty and zealous and loyal to the Lord and the principles of his Truth in the end of this age, to graduate with first honors.

As there was a special period of testing and trying at the close of the Jewish Age, lasting for forty years, so the Scriptures clearly indicate, there is a special sifting and testing; due to come to Christendom during the closing forty years of this Gospel Age before the inauguration of the glorious Millennial blessings. As the trials and tests came upon the Jews in a subtle manner, to test their faith and obedience, so even more subtly must we expect will be connected with the trials and testings in the harvest time of this Gospel Age. Of this time the Lord through the prophet said, "Who

may abide the day of his presence, and who shall stand when he appeareth? for he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; and he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the Lord acceptable sacrifices" (Malachi iii, 2, 3).

\*Both Houses of Israel.

Natural and Spiritual Israel are contrasted. The Lord through the Prophet foretold that Messiah would be "for a stone of stumbling and for a rock of offence to both the houses of Israel"—to Natural Israel and to Spiritual Israel. We have seen how the first house stumbled on that Palm Sunday—celebrated today. They stumbled "because they knew not the time of their visitation"—they did not know that the time had come for the establishment of the Kingdom; hence they were not alert to their privileges and failed to be in the proper condition of heart to receive the blessings. Or, we might state the matter reversely and say that those who did not know and did not accept Messiah, were those whose hearts were not in the right condition, else they would not have been left in darkness (I Thessalonians v, 4).

Many things indicate to us, now, that we are living in a time corresponding to that Palm Sunday! Many things imply that Christendom is now undergoing its great test and that only the fully consecrated of heart and life will be accepted of the Lord as his "Jewels" and be granted a share with Christ in his Kingdom. Many things imply that we are now in the time when the true people of God are being divided into two classes, as pictured for us by our Lord in the parable of the Wise and the Foolish Virgins. As only the Wise Virgins were prepared to enter into the marriage, so only the consecrated ones, the polished jewels of the Lord, will be accepted as fit for the Kingdom and be granted a share in the glorious resurrection change which will precede the great time of trouble, in which the Foolish Virgin class, although not of the world, will participate with the world.

True, that great time of trouble will usher in the glorious Millennial dispensation, in which the Church in glory with the Great Redeemer will pour out upon all mankind the wonderful restitution blessings which God has promised by the mouth of all the holy prophets (Acts iii, 19-25). True, the Foolish Virgins may subsequently get the oil and subsequently have a glorious future, but they will lose the choice place of Divine favor and blessing. They cannot be of the "Bride" class, but will receive their blessing under the figure of "the virgins her companions that follow her" (Psalm xlv, 14).

It is in order for all of God's people who now get awake from the slumber of worldliness which has long stupefied them, to join hearts and voices in a great shout—the shout that the Kingdom is at hand! The shout of Hosanna to the Son of David! And that the time is at hand for the fulfillment of the passage, "Gather together my saints unto me, saith the Lord! those who have made a covenant with me by sacrifice. They shall be mine, saith the Lord, in that day when I come to make up my jewels" (individually) (Malachi iii, 17).

"See That Ye Refuse Not Him." As the Jewish nation was not ready to receive Jesus as its King, on that first Palm Sunday, neither is Christendom now ready to receive him at his second advent. As it was, only the "Israelites indeed," in whom was so gentle, that then knew the voice of the Shepherd, so it will be here an individual matter. The Laodicean period of the Church's history is upon us (Revelation iii, 17). The Nominalism of our day is fully portrayed by our Lord's words. Christendom boasts that she is rich and increased in goods and has need of nothing; and knows not that she is poor and miserable and blind and naked. The Lord now stands at the door and knocks. He offers himself to the "Israelites indeed." Ours is Palm Sunday in the highest sense of all. How are we receiving the great blessings which betoken the parousia of the Master? Do we hear his knock? Have we opened our hearts? Are we searching his Word and listening for his voice and seeking to know and to do his will in all things? To all such very shortly, we believe, will come the greater and fuller Pentecostal blessing—the resurrection "change," from the glory of character merely to the glory of person as well, when we shall see our Redeemer as he is, and share his glory. As St. Paul says, "See that ye reject not him that speaketh from heaven!" Greater light, greater privilege, greater blessing every way are ours than were those enjoyed by the Jews at our Lord's first advent. These privileges and blessings are our tests. Let us be faithful. Let us present our bodies living sacrifices and with renewed zeal seek to glorify our Lord in our bodies and our spirits, which are his (I Corinthians vi, 20).

Those who have the eyes to see and the ears to appreciate the voice now speaking from heaven should be alert to hail him Lord of all—to accept him as their Redeemer and King and voluntarily to present themselves to him and his service—not waiting for the time when he shall reveal himself in power and great glory to the world in general. The Lord is now looking for saints, for overcomers, valiant, faithful, persevering, and thoroughly devoted to him, to his Cause of Righteousness, and thoroughly opposed to sin and especially active in overcoming its domination in their own hearts. In their own minds, in their own bodies. Such the Master pictures as his joint-heirs, priestly kings, sitting with himself in his Throne of glory and world dominion.

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