

Passiontide Sermons  
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SERMON XII.  
POPULAR RELIGIOUS ENTHUSIASM.  
Preached at St. Paul's on Passion Sunday, April 6, 1879.

St. John xii. 12, 13.

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 the King of Israel That cometh in the Name of the Lord.

OUR Lord's entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday was one of the most important events in His whole earthly life. It was the great public act by which He entered upon the duties and sufferings of the week in which He died for the salvation of the world: and by it He gave notice, if I may so say, to the faithful, and to mankind at large, of what He was about to do and to suffer. Palm Sunday is the solemn introduction—if the metaphor is allowable, it is the overture—to the week which follows; and it anticipates, but with due reserve, the solemn tragedy which it introduces. And so this is one of the few events in our Lord's Life which is described by all the four Evangelists. Approaching the Passion from very different points of view, each Evangelist is alive to the unique character of the entry into Jerusalem, as a proceeding which is marked, on the part of our Lord, with even more deliberation than are His actions, always so deliberate, on other occasions. Each Evangelist mentions the animal on which our Lord rode, in fulfilment of prophecy; each repeats, with but slight variations from the rest, the Hymn of praise which was sung by the people who accompanied Him; each is careful to note the great number of persons, some of them disciples, some of them independent lookers-on, who were present, and who were led to take a part, more or less pronounced, in this great demonstration of enthusiastic religious feeling.

I.

The occasion was, indeed, of capital significance in the Life of our Lord; and its bearing upon His Work and Sufferings, and claims upon the faith and homage of mankind have been, from the first ages of Christianity, constantly and earnestly recognised. To-day, however, we may, perhaps with advantage, consider it as affording a great display of feelings of reverence and love, on the part of an assembled multitude, which our Lord condescended to sanction and to accept. The governing motive of what took place on Palm Sunday was religious rather than, for instance, social or political. No doubt there was a political element at work in the popular feeling which welcomed Jesus of Nazareth as the expected Messiah. For some generations the Jews had read their national hopes and

ambitions into the ancient prophets; and, as a consequence, the idea of the coming Messiah, which the Jews of that day entertained, was largely political. The Messiah was expected to be a great Captain and Ruler of men, by whose genius and victories Israel would be freed from the yoke of his western conquerors, and would become the ruling race in some new and world-wide empire. We cannot assert that no such feeling as this was entertained by any who took part in the demonstration on Palm Sunday; nor can it be denied that there may have been a social feeling at work as well as a political one. Those who did not listen attentively to what our Lord said, and did not look below the surface of His bearing and actions, would have seen in Jesus Christ a social reformer of the highest class, as well as a great philanthropist, endowed with extraordinary faculties for giving effect to His benevolence, so that His earthly presence was a moveable hospital, within whose precincts every form of human suffering might find relief. Such a personage would in all ages and under any circumstances command general interest and devotion.

But when our Lord entered Jerusalem, religious motives had more to do with the welcome that greeted Him than any others. Our Lord addressed Himself to the religious feeling of the people, as distinct from their political hopes or their social gratitude, when He entered Jerusalem riding on an ass. The warrior-politician of Jewish Messianic fancy would surely have been mounted on some richly caparisoned charger, surrounded with chariots and horsemen; the horse, then, as always, in human estimation, the nobler animal, was already in the book of Proverbs, in Hosea, and in Jeremiah, associated with the enterprises and triumphs of war—the horse, in the popular imagination, was ever “prepared against the day of battle.” When our Lord, with such forethought and deliberation, chose the ass, He was at once setting aside the foolish political dreams of his countrymen, and was claiming to fulfil Zechariah’s prediction of the Messiah’s entry into Jerusalem as the King of peace, “Behold, thy King cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass.”

And the action of a large part of the gathered multitude was no less expressive of religious as distinct from political or social feeling. This appears from the circumstance described by St. John in the text—“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.” St. Matthew and St. Mark say that a great multitude cut clown branches from the trees and strewed them in the way; and this is sometimes carelessly supposed to be what is referred to in other terms by St. John. In truth—and it is important to mark this—the acts were different, the agents were different, and the objects of the acts were different. The trees by the road-side, whose branches were cut down, would not have been palms (the leaves of which would have been out of reach), and were almost certainly olives. The people who cut them down were coming from Bethany, and the action does not necessarily mean more than the bounding joy and reverence for Jesus which was also expressed by spreading garments along the road of His progress. But the palms, which St. John alone mentions, were not cut down on this occasion, but were brought out of Jerusalem by a multitude which went out to meet the procession advancing from Bethany. These palms had been cut in all probability some days before, and were now festooned with myrtle and otherwise, as was the custom, in readiness for the approaching Passover. They were not strewed along the ground, they were carried in the air before our Lord, and their use on this occasion would have been a proclamation, more or less conscious, that “He is the very Paschal Lamb Which taketh away the sin of the

world.” Indeed, it would seem that the band which advanced from Jerusalem kindled a new enthusiasm in the pilgrims from Bethany, and then they joined together in singing the hymn of praise, “Hosanna, save now, O Lord: Blessed is He That cometh in the Name of the Lord.” This was a third circumstance which marked the religious character of the enthusiasm. The words are from the Psalm cxviii.; they had long been used at the Feast of Tabernacles, and at the Paschal festival; they were connected in the minds of pious Jews with the coming of the expected Messiah; and so, as the mingled company advanced down the slope of the Mount of Olives, and towards the gates of the sacred city, they surrounded Jesus Christ with actions, and they hymned Him in language, denoting at the very least deeply moved religious feelings of thankfulness and love. “Hosanna: Blessed is He That cometh in the Name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.”

It may be asked how this religious feeling could have been kindled in so large and mixed a multitude of persons. It is plain, first of all, that a main impulse proceeded from the company which came out from Jerusalem, and which was composed of “people that had come to the feast,” that is to say, of Jews of the provinces or of the Dispersion, who were generally more devout, more attentive to the guidance of prophecy, and to God’s teaching through events, than the Jews who lived in the sacred city. It was the conduct of these Jews which drew from the leading Pharisees the despairing remark, “Perceive ye how ye prevail nothing? behold, the world is gone after him; “I and they would have been likely to influence the general multitude more powerfully than could the disciples coming from Bethany. Their homage to Jesus Christ would have been considered by the nation at large at once more disinterested and surprising; and to them probably—among human agencies—must be attributed a large share in the events of the day.

Of course, in so mixed a multitude on such an occasion, there would have been very various degrees of conviction and insight, while nevertheless they all united in recognising in Jesus Christ something higher than was to be found among the sons of men. On other occasions we find this recognition in the most dissimilar quarters. It was an Apostle who cried, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord;” a demoniac which exclaimed, “We know Thee Who Thou art, the Holy One of God;” a Pagan soldier who observed, “Truly this was the Son of God;” a multitude which agreed, “Never man spake like this Man.” From very different levels of religious existence it is possible to recognise some elemental truths; just as the sun in the heavens is visible in the deepest valleys not less than on the summits of the Alps. There was that in Jesus Christ which compelled much religious recognition. That union of tenderness and strength, of lowliness and majesty, of sternness and love, of weakness and power, must have struck many a man who never asked himself what it really meant, yet as unlike anything he had ever seen on earth. Such a man could not have explained himself; but he was not the less under the empire of the impression produced by our Lord’s Character: and thus, when an opportunity of giving outward vent to his pent-up feelings presented itself, he would have joined in it, though the words he used went beyond his present insight. Many a man who little knew its full import sang on that day no doubt with a full heart, “Hosanna: Blessed is He That cometh in the Name of the Lord.” The enthusiasm which is created by a multitude of men in each one of the units who compose it, is a result of the nature which God has given us. He has made us social beings. He has endowed us with many qualities and dispositions which not merely fit us for companionship with each other, but which require it, in order to our complete satisfaction and wellbeing.

When human beings come together in great numbers, this social side of our nature is brought powerfully into play, it may be without our knowing it; instead of thinking of ourselves as individuals, we then think of ourselves as integral parts of a great multitude. There is a contagion of sympathy in great masses of associated men—a contagion of regulated passion—almost a contagion of thought. Mind beats in unison with mind, heart with heart, will with will, under the strain and compulsion of a common object presented to the view of a gathered multitude; it is felt that personal traits, eccentricities, preferences, prejudices are here out of place; what distinguishes a man from his fellows at other times is for the moment lost sight of in the overpowering sense of that which unites him to them; and thus, like reeds before the wind, private feelings, and sometimes even strong resolutions, go down for the moment, and bend in submission before the imperious ascendancy of this common enthusiasm; and a multitude moves as if it were a single body animated by a single soul, with a simple directness and intensity of purpose, towards its goal.

This sense of association is the soul of all powerful corporate action among men. It is the soul of an army: each soldier sees in his comrade not merely another fighting unit, but a man to whom he is bound by the sympathies inspired by common enterprise and danger. It is the spirit which gives influence to a public assembly; since such a body is less dependent for its usefulness on the capacity of the orators who may address it than on the pervading sense among its members of united thoughts, and hearts, and resolves for the promotion of a common object. Is it conceivable that when the highest of all subjects that can forcibly interest human beings is in question, it should have nothing to say to so fertile and powerful an influence? No; wherever human beings have engaged in that noblest of human occupations, the worship of a Higher Power, they have laid the sense of association under tribute; each worshipper feels that he is not alone, face to face with the Awful Object of worship; he knows himself to be engaged in a work to which all around him are devoting themselves; if his thoughts and affections are first of all directed upon God, they are also entwined by sympathy with the affections and the thoughts of his fellow-men around him; and in this felt communion of each with all and of all with each lies the strength of public worship, and to it was granted of old that it cancelled irrevocable charter, “Where two or three are gathered together in My Name, there am I in the midst of them.” It was this enthusiasm arising from the sense of association among the members of a great assemblage of human beings, which our Lord took into His service so conspicuously on Palm Sunday. He had had multitudes before; Him not unfrequently before, to instruct, to feed, to bless them; but He had withdrawn Himself from their advances, as when they desired to make Him a King; He saw further than those around Him; He had His own times for reserve and for self-abandonment. To-day He yields Himself to the enthusiasm of the people; He the Lord of hearts and wills, Who knew what was in man, and could control it, bids the surging and uncertain currents of feeling in a mixed multitude of men, on this memorable day, minister to His glory. It is a power called into existence for all time; St. Paul will tell the Corinthians that at the sight of the ordered worship of the Church, a heathen should fall down and confess that God was in it of a truth;<sup>4</sup> St. Augustine will leave on record how, as yet unconvicted, he was touched by the hymns which were sung by the assembled faithful in the Church of Milan. On all the mountains of the world, as of old on the slope of Olivet, weak and sinful men shall join henceforth with the choirs of Angels in the worship of Christ’s Sacred

Manhood—in the ascription to the Lamb that was slain of that praise and honour which is everlastingly His due.

## II.

It cannot be denied that the sympathy which is inspired by the sense of fellowship with a multitude of our fellow-creatures may tell in more directions than one. It may be turned downwards as well as upwards: it may become an instrument of violence and wrong. Associated masses of men have at times even achieved gigantic evil. At the bidding of some malignant genius, multitudes of men have again and again in the world's history taken leave of reason and conscience, and have abandoned themselves to those brutal ferocities which, in the absence of conscience and reason, occupy the throne of the human soul.

In many an Eastern city, so well-informed travellers assure us, a chance expression or an unintended gesture, or a wild suspicion, or a word of order dropped by some influential dervish, will fall like a spark upon a mass of inflammable matter; where but now all was peaceful and reassuring, an angry crowd has assembled, whose faces gather blackness, and who threaten or execute some deed of blood. Nor is the terrific power of conscious association for violent crime unknown to our Western civilisation; it may be questioned whether any darker examples of it are to be found than those which the first French Revolution again and again supplies. Human nature being what it is, the precept not to follow a multitude to do evil is never unneeded.

If, then, Palm Sunday places us face to face with a great religious enthusiasm, we cannot help thinking of what will follow. The foil to Palm Sunday is Good Friday. What will these people who are strewing the road with their garments and bearing palms before the advancing Saviour, and singing Hosannas to His praise—what will they be doing then? Will none of them be spitting in His Adorable Face, or buffeting Him, or smiting Him with the palms of their hands? Will none of them join in the brutal demand that the robber Barabbas shall be preferred before Him? Will none help to force the Pagan governor to a crime from which he shrinks, by swelling the cry, "Away with Him! Crucify Him! crucify Him"? Do we not already see in the tears which Jesus sheds, as He passes the crest of the hill, and the city comes into full view, that His Eye is full upon the future; that He knows what is before Him; that while the agony and the shame in prospect cannot touch the calm depths of His Holy Soul, He does not take what is passing at more than its real worth; He does not forget the sad and certain fact that the applause of all but thoroughly good men is the exact measure of their possible or probable hostility? And yet here it is possible to draw a mistaken inference from the whole scene. Does it not prove, men go on to ask, the worthlessness of all corporate religious enthusiasm? What was the outcome, after all, of these palms, of that path carpeted with robes and branches, of that procession of palm-bearers, of those ringing songs of praise? What did it lead to practically? Did it not precede almost immediately the great crime of the Crucifixion? and may not the condition of popular feeling that led up to the Crucifixion have been a reaction from unnatural religious excitement which preceded it? Is not religion always a strictly personal relation between man and his Maker, between God and each single soul? And does not a tempest of feeling, like that on Palm Sunday, tend to obscure this simple and vital truth, and to invest what is merely human and almost physical with the

semblance of spiritual energy and life?

It is clear, brethren, that at least no Christian can be of this opinion. For, on Palm Sunday, it appears that a like objection was felt by some Pharisees who asked our Lord to rebuke His disciples who were chanting Hosanna. And He said unto them, "I tell you, if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out."

No, brethren! the religious enthusiasm of a multitude is not therefore worthless because its worth may be exaggerated, or because it may not be lasting, or because it may be succeeded by an enthusiasm which is not religious. It is not a profound view of human nature which explains successive moods of human feeling as a series of reactions,—as though the heart of man must perforce oscillate like a pendulum in a clock with perpetual exactness, first to this extreme of feeling and then to that. Religious enthusiasm, however we arrive at it, has ever a certain value of its own: there is not too much of it in our busy modern world, where the whole thought and energy of the majority of men is unreservedly devoted to the passing but engrossing things of sense and time. Surely it is something, now and then, to rub off if it be only a little of the dust which clogs the wings of the human spirit; surely it is something to escape, for an hour or two if it must be no more, from the cold prison-house of matter in which so much of modern thought, so many modern souls are strictly imprisoned, into the free warm atmosphere of the world of spirits, into the rays of the Love of God. Grant that religious enthusiasm is often misguided, shallow, unchastened, unpractical; effervescent, but unproductive; rising from the heat of the spirit, and then presently dying away; yet surely it is better than the total absence of any thought about, or feeling after, higher things: better than the unbroken reign of death, which continued forgetfulness of God, on the part of a being made to love and praise Him everlastingly, must surely mean. An hour's bright sunshine on a December day is not the summer: but it reminds us that the sun is there, and it is better than a cloud-bound sky with the temperature below freezing.

And if religious enthusiasm be kindled by the sense of association with a multitude of men who are engaged, each according to his light and strength, in praising the Perfect Being, who are we that we should object? Each man nowadays has his one narrow prescription for the spiritual improvement of his fellows; God, Who has made us, and Who knows what we are, is more generous and more considerate.

He is not bound to times and places, to petty proprieties and rules, in His vast action upon the spirit of man, when He would draw it towards Himself. Sometimes He approaches it through the operations of reason, sometimes through the yearning of the heart after Higher Beauty; sometimes He speaks to it in the mysteries of nature, sometimes in the solemnities of history, sometimes even through art, such as music or painting, and not unfrequently, as, in fact, on Palm Sunday, through the felt sympathies of a multitude of human beings. He has indeed, other and more powerful agencies behind,—His own Holy and Sanctifying Spirit, the Divine and Inspired Scriptures, an organised and teaching Church, Sacraments that are channels of grace and power,—but the wind of His compassion bloweth where it listeth, and its heavenly action is beyond the scope both of our criticism and our approval.

But undoubtedly it is better to regard any such warmer feelings which God may in His mercy give us from time to time, not as ends in themselves, not as great spiritual attainments or accomplishments, but as means to an end beyond. The religious feeling which at times takes possession of multitudes of men, which raises them above their

ordinary level, and makes them fancy themselves capable of acts or sacrifices which, in their cooler moments, would seem to be impossible, is like a flood-tide—to be made the most of while it lasts, but not to be counted on as lasting. Like the tide, it will assuredly recede, and, therefore, what is to be done by its aid, must be done at once. What is wanted is not merely hymns and psalms but the obedience which marks true discipleship, and the practical resolutions which give to obedience reality and shape. It is especially desirable to bear this in mind at this sacred season, when all hearts in which Christian faith is a living power are stirred to the depths by the remembrance or the contemplation of the Sufferings of the Redeemer of the world. How shall any Christian follow the solemn service which will be held in this Cathedral on Tuesday evening,<sup>1</sup> and not kindle at the thought of what the Eternal Son has achieved for sinners? How shall we listen on Good Friday to the Words of Christ hanging on His Cross, and not desire to live as men who have been bought with a price, even infinite in its value? If God, in His mercy, does grant to us such thoughts and desires as these, will they not be enhanced by the knowledge that they are shared, in various degrees, by thousands at our side,—shared by millions whom we do not see with our bodily eyes, but who, throughout Christendom, are with us engaged in thankful remembrance of the Great Sacrifice? Surely the risk is, not lest we should be too richly endowed with such feelings as these; but lest, having them, we should let them run to waste instead of turning them to account; lest we should sing Hosanna to-day, with more or less sincerity, only to cry “Crucify,” by relapse into some old sin a short while hence. What is needed is resolution taken in the strength of God the Holy Spirit and after earnest prayer. Resolution to do, or to give up doing, that one thing which conscience, having its eye upon the Cross, may prescribe. If God gives us warmer feelings, let us humbly and sincerely thank Him; but let us also pray with the Psalmist, “Try me, O God, and seek the ground of my heart: prove me, and examine my thoughts: look well if there be any way of wickedness in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

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<sup>1</sup> The service in St. Paul’s Cathedral on Tuesday in Holy Week, when Bach’s “Passion-Musik” is rendered.