

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Today Jesus crosses the Rubicon, as the saying goes. There is no turning back. Already back in chapter 9 of Luke's Gospel he had "set his face" to go to Jerusalem, where he knew death awaited him. Today he arrives at his destination. The die is cast. As I always do when I'm preparing to preach on a text, I try to get a sense of its larger context, so I always look at least at a few verses before and a few verses after the assigned text. What struck me in doing that this week is what Jesus does immediately after our reading today ends, once he enters Jerusalem. He begins to weep over what he knows will be the fate of Jerusalem, and he says this, speaking to the city: "Indeed, the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you, and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another." It's hard not to connect these words of Jesus to the images and reports coming out of Ukraine in the past week or so, detailing the slaughter of civilians in Bucha near Kyiv, and the ongoing devastation in the southern coastal city of Mariupol, to name only the most prominent examples. Women, children, and the elderly are being crushed to the ground right before our eyes. Theaters, houses, train stations, and hospitals are being reduced to piles of rubble. Jesus is going to his death this week, for us and for our salvation. And yet his life, death, and resurrection, though life-giving and life-saving, do not stop Romans from destroying Jerusalem or Russians from destroying Ukraine. Jesus knows this, and weeping is proper response.

There are three things that I want us to notice in our Gospel reading today that will get us ready for the rest of Holy Week and Easter. First, Jesus knows what he's getting himself in to. Second, Jesus is a legitimate threat to the powers that be. And third, Jesus will not be silenced or deterred from his mission.

First, Jesus knows what he is doing here, and he means to do it. Jesus had been in and out of Jerusalem any number of times before the events in today's reading, and I think it's fair to assume that each time he walked in and out like most everybody else, without drawing attention to himself or his followers. This time, his choice to ride in on a colt is a signal to his followers that he is the Messiah, the expected king that God would send to restore the kingdom of Israel. The Romans wouldn't have gotten that signal, but his own people would. They would have been familiar with the prophecy in Zechariah, "behold, your king comes to you... humble and riding ... on a colt, the foal of a donkey." But when the crowd begins chanting and calling Jesus king, well the Romans certainly got the point then. A few weeks ago we heard the Pharisees come and tell Jesus to run away because Herod was looking for him to kill him, and Jesus responded that he could not be killed outside of Jerusalem. Now this is coming to pass. This is Jesus doing what Paul describes in our Philippians reading, or to be more precise, what Paul probably quotes from an early Christian hymn, describing how in his incarnation Jesus willingly gave up his divine power and prerogatives, emptied himself of any sense or appearance of superiority, and willingly gave his life for the sake of the world.

Second, Jesus is a threat to the powers that be. Here in the crowd of followers it seems like the threat is an immediate political one. With all these people calling him king, who knows what could happen next. A riot? A coup? That may have been what the Romans were thinking. And that's what the Pharisees are worried about. They don't want Jesus to provoke the Romans - to poke the bear, as it were. From the Roman point of view, Jesus and his followers look like one

more Jewish rebellion in the making. Because there had been a lot of rebellions, especially at this time of year during the Passover festival. But as we know, that's not what happens. Instead, some of Jesus' own people, particularly the religious establishment, will collude with the Romans to do the absolute worst thing in their power to a would-be king: put him to a cruel, painful, and humiliating death. And Jesus will not resist it. He will endure it. And, remarkably – impossibly – he will not be defeated. The real threat is to be found elsewhere, in the story of his death and resurrection that will spread like wildfire throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. The Roman Empire is now long gone. But the message of the gospel endures.

And that leads directly to the third thing to notice in this reading: Jesus will not be silenced or deterred from his mission. The Pharisees want him to be deterred, though. They want him to silence the crowd and end this disturbance, to stop giving the Romans a pretext to further oppress and brutalize their people. And even though the crowds will soon turn against him, and the immediate political threat that the Romans are worried about will quickly dissolve, Jesus' threat to the powers of sin, death, and evil – the powers that would divide and conquer, that would separate people from God and from one another – that threat will not be diminished. Despite all appearances to the contrary, those powers are being conquered through Jesus' death and resurrection. And the message of that victory will not be silenced either. Those who follow Jesus will spread that message to the ends of the earth.

All three of these things have direct significance for us today as we prepare to enter into the central mystery of our faith this week and as we endeavor to live out our faith in the days, months, and years to come. First, we should be confident that Jesus knows what he is doing even now as he entrusts the saving message of his gospel to the likes of you and me. It's no accident. He's doing this on purpose. He means for us to be his ambassadors and heralds, proclaiming with our words and our actions his coming kingdom. Second, we should recognize that the gospel message we bear is a real threat to the powers that be – the political powers, the economic powers, and all the other coercive powers that dominate everyday life. And that means that the gospel might be a threat to us and to the way of life that we have become accustomed to, especially those of us for whom the way things are is working pretty well. To be sure, the gospel does not encourage violent uprisings like the Romans feared. But there are worse things than that for the coercive powers that be. Jesus' submission to the worst that they can throw at him, his journey through suffering, pain, and death, does not get rid of him. It leads rather to new life, and not only for himself, but for all who by the grace of God follow after him in faith. That is a nightmare scenario for tyrants of all kinds. It exposes their false promises and opens the door to a kingdom of love, mercy, and righteousness that he is bringing to pass. Third, we should take heart that Jesus will not be silenced or deterred from his mission even now, even when throng of loud voices use his name as a cover for their own coercive and selfish agendas and pervert the gospel into a parody of itself. Even as churches close and many are alienated from even the very idea of God, Jesus does not give up on the ongoing mission to save us from sin, death, evil, and ourselves. Let us enter into this Holy Week assured by these promises, and confident that the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.