



# St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

Palm Sunday, being the Sunday before Easter, April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2007

## **In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.**

None of the people who cheered Jesus into Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday had the slightest inkling that by the end of the week they would be howling for his crucifixion. They had absolutely no doubt that he was the long awaited Messiah. We know this because they hailed him in precisely the manner the Temple liturgy prescribed for greeting the Messiah – with strewn palm branches and shouts of Hosanna or “Save us now.”

By the end of the week, however, the cheers had turned to jeers because, as I pointed out last Sunday, they were outraged by Jesus' claim to be the divine Son of God. They condemned him as a blasphemer. They believed the Messiah would be an entirely human figure, a mighty warrior, and that the salvation he would offer would be a release from human bondage – in much the same way that Moses freed the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt.

But if they had bothered to study the liturgy from which the Messiah's welcome was derived they would have discovered it was they who were the blasphemers, not Jesus. It came from the service that celebrated the enthronement of God in the Temple – a festival that commemorated the time King David brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem and its installation in the First Temple built by David's son, Solomon.

In the days of Solomon, the Ark was taken in solemn procession through the Temple, with the people bearing palms, singing psalm and strewing their coats in

the way for the Levites bearing the Ark to walk upon. After Solomon's the Ark disappeared but God's enthronement celebrations continued in much the same manner. And by the time of Jesus, the liturgical music had been fixed on three psalms, known as "the Messianic Trilogy." They are psalms that are as well known today as they were back then – Psalms 22, 23 and 24.

The pleas for salvation – "hosh hana" – come from Psalms 22 and 23. Psalm 24, however, makes it clear that the person who will be doing the saving is God, not man. It begins: "The earth is the Lord's, and all that therein is; the compass of the world, and they that dwell therein . . ."

The concluding triumphant paean makes it clear, beyond all doubt, that God is the one being addressed: "Lift up your head, O ye gates; and be ye lift up ye everlasting doors; and the King of Glory shall come in.

"Who is this king of glory? It is the Lord strong and mighty, even the Lord mighty in battle.

"Lift up you head, O ye gates; and be ye lift up ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in.

"Who is this King of glory? Even the Lord of Hosts, he is the king of glory."

Not much room for doubt there, is there? I mean it's plain the psalm is addressed to God, not to some human general. I guess in any other society you could get away with calling a human general "a lord of hosts," but not in Jewish society. In Judea at the time of Christ there was only one "Lord of Hosts" – God.

Doubtless, the religious scholars rationalized the words of scripture just as we do today. Moses – the greatest of all prophets – had been human, not divine. While the Messiah might be his equal, he wouldn't be greater than God's greatest servant. The psalms sung to herald the Messiah were clearly allegorical, thus hyperbole was to be expected. References to the Messiah as God were not to be taken literally, they merely meant the salvation he would be bringing came from God.

Biblical history, of course, is littered with examples of that sort of rationalization that turned out to be utterly mistaken. What God had prophesied, he intended to be

taken literally. For example, Jeremiah prophesied that the people of Judah's exile in Babylon would last only 70 years. Yet it took most of them entirely by when King Cyrus freed them after 70 years in captivity.

Similarly, the priest Zacharias, father of John the Baptist's, had not the slightest suspicion of what would happen when he went into the Temple to pray at the Altar of Incense for the salvation of Israel. He was shocked and amazed when suddenly the angel Gabriel appeared and announced: "Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard." Actually that wasn't what Zacharias wanted to hear at all. He just wanted to say a nice routine service and toddle off home to diner.

I've often wondered what the folks who cheered Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and bayed for his death on Good Friday thought when they watched him on the Cross. I wonder if they cast their minds back to the first psalm they sang on Palm Sunday – Psalm 22: It's words are quite striking. Let me read you a few excerpts:

MY GOD, my God, look upon me; why hast thou forsaken me : and art so far from my health, and from the words of my complaint?

7. All they that see me laugh me to scorn: they shoot our their lips, and shake their heads, saying,

8. He trusted in God, that he would deliver him : let him deliver him, if he will have him.

17. They pierced my hands and my feet; I may tell all my bones : they stand staring and looking upon me.

18. They part my garments among them : and casts lots upon my vesture.

The whole psalm is a graphic and amazingly accurate description of the crucifixion and it was written best part of a thousand years before the event took place. What I really wonder is: How on earth did they manage to rationalize their way out of that one. *AMEN.*

***To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.***