

Bearing Witness To Truth

A Palm Sunday Sermon by Rev Kurt H. Asplundh

"You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth" (John 18:37).

When the Lord rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, He was received as a king. A great multitude took branches of palm trees and went out to meet Him. They cried out: "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! The King of Israel!" (John 12:13). It was a royal welcome.

Not everyone was pleased. The chief priests and Pharisees hated the Lord. They cried out from the crowd while the multitude of disciples praised Him saying, "Teacher, rebuke Your disciples." He answered that the "stones would immediately cry out" if the people were silenced (Luke 9:38-40). The very rocks and stones of creation would bear witness to the sovereignty of the Lord.

It was less than a week later that the Lord's enemies would bring Him to the court of Pilate where this issue of kingship would be argued again. The chief priests and scribes had condemned the Lord before their own religious council with the charge of blasphemy in His claim that He was the Son of God. For this they wanted to put Him to death. Being a subject people, however, the Jews could not impose the death sentence.

They needed the permission of the Roman governor, Pilate. Since the Romans had no interest in the religious laws of the Jews or their theological disputes, the Jews brought a different charge. Bringing the Lord to Pilate they said: "We found this fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, saying that He Himself is Christ, a King" (Luke 23:2). It was on this charge that Pilate questioned the Lord in the Praetorium. The question was: Did the Lord pose a threat to the authority of the Roman government? Was He seeking a following to overthrow those in power? Pilate needed to determine if the Lord was indeed the King of the Jews.

In answer to Pilate's question, "Are You the King of the Jews?" the Lord plainly said: "It is as you say" (Mark 15:2). But He added: "My

kingdom is not of this world.... My kingdom is not from here" (John 18:36). This was a puzzling statement for the Roman administrator.

What did Pilate know of other worlds? What kind of king could he be that had no temporal power? So he asked again, "Are you a king then?"

The Lord answered: "You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth" (John 18:37).

What is the meaning of the Lord's answer to Pilate? It is clear to us now. What He said was that truth is a king and that He Himself had come to present the truth to the mind of man. So He added: "Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice" (Ibid.).

Pilate was not a religious or philosophical man, but neither was he unintelligent. He understood from this testimony that the Lord's purpose was to bear witness to a truth that would rule the minds of men. While he understood this, he was skeptical of it. The Word records his well known response. Pilate said: "What is truth?" (John 18:38)

"What is truth?" The Heavenly Doctrine comments on this. From the question of Pilate "it is clear," we are told, "that he understood that truth was called 'king' by the Lord... " (Apocalypse Explained 31:3). What he doubted was whether truth was, indeed, king. His words pose the crucial question: "Is truth a king?" (Apocalypse Explained 27:4, Apocalypse Revealed 20)

The rest of the account of the Lord's trial is a sad confirmation of Pilate's skeptical attitude about the power of truth. The truth did not rule the decisions that were soon to be made. Neither truth nor justice held sway in the tumultuous events that followed. From the moment Pilate appeared before the Lord's accusers with the verdict: "I find no fault in Him at all," hatreds, fears, angry emotions, and selfish ambitions took over. The rulers of the Jews did not want the truth from Pilate. They wanted their will. Time and again, they demonstrated the rejection of the rule of truth. This first happened in the matter of Barabbas.

It was customary at their feast that one of the prisoners should be released. Pilate offered them "the King of the Jews" or Barabbas. As we

know from exposition, this is a choice between the rule of truth or the rule of principles of murder and theft embodied by Barabbas. The crowd cried out vehemently: "Not this Man, but Barabbas!"

"Not this Man!" What could be more clear?

Later the Lord stood before the people wearing a crown of thorns and a purple robe after He had been whipped and mocked by the soldiers.

"Behold the Man!" He said. He was inviting them to see how the truth had been violated, mocked and rejected. There was no remorse, no sense of loss. Impelled by another king, the spirit of self-love they had welcomed in their hearts, they cried out unmercifully, "Crucify Him, crucify Him." Pilate asked: "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar!" Imagine what that really means! The inner sense of what they shouted was that they were ruled by nothing but practical expediency. The Lord's truth was of no importance to them. After the priests had cried out, spiritually denying the Lord, Pilate gave Him up to their will.

He was crucified with two thieves at the place called Golgotha. The accusation affixed to the cross by Pilate read: "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" (John 19:19). Even in His condemnation, the Jews objected: "Do not write 'The King of the Jews,'" they said. Inwardly they were rejecting the Divine truth that should be king. Write "He said, I am the King of the Jews." But Pilate would not acquiesce to this. "What I have written, I have written" (John 19:21, 22). And so the title stood in spite of their objection, the very truth of the matter is written in Hebrew, Greek and Latin.

It is not coincidental that the testaments which have borne witness to the Lord's sovereign power also are written in these three sacred languages: the Old Testament in Hebrew, which declares the creative power of the one God of heaven and earth; the New Testament in Greek, which records His incarnation and redemption of the race; and the Heavenly Doctrine of the New Jerusalem in Latin, which reveals the living Essence of His Divine Humanity.

"For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world," the Lord declared, "that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice" (John 18:37).

Let us ask ourselves on this Palm Sunday if we can be numbered among those who are "of the truth" who hear the Lord's voice. Pilate was not among these. As he was a Gentile and knew nothing from the Word, he could not be taught that Divine truth is from the Lord or that the Lord Himself bore witness to Divine truth (see Apocalypse Explained 31:3). Pilate was not only skeptical of the power of truth but unaware that there was any source of authoritative truth. The Jews who wanted to crucify the Lord were not numbered among those who were of the truth. They had rejected the truth. We are told that "they desired a king who would exalt them over all in the whole earth. And as the Lord's kingdom was not earthly but heavenly, they perverted everything that was said respecting Him in the Word, and mocked at what was foretold of Him. This is what was represented by their placing a crown of thorns upon His head, and smiting His head" (Apocalypse Explained 577:4). What of us? Are we "of the truth" and willing to hear the Lord's voice? Do we welcome the King with joy and a willing heart? The greeting of the Lord with palms and Hosannas on that first Palm Sunday pictures a ready acceptance of the truth of the Word, an acknowledgment and confession of the Lord as our king.

Is this our welcome or do we share the rejection of the Jews or the skepticism of Pilate, asking, "What is truth?" Is truth a king? Pilate recognized that the Lord was not a direct threat to the empire. Had He not said: "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews ... " (John 18:36)? What Pilate had not learned and did not know was the Lord's teaching that the kingdom of God is within. "The kingdom of God does not come with observation," He had said to the Pharisees; "nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:20, 21).

Here was a new concept to the Jews. Until now they had only an idea of kingdoms of this world, of nations and rulers and subjects under them. The Lord taught of a spiritual kingdom, a kingdom within us that is organized and developed by the spirit of truth. It is this "inner" kingdom that truth can rule. And when the spirit of man is ruled by truth, his actions in the world are also ruled by truth from within.

By creation every man is free. He can be compelled outwardly and be forced to live according to certain laws, but he cannot be compelled to think or believe against his will. We choose the king of our

inner life. And this is our real life. The convictions, the principles, the ideals we choose to live by, are the essentials of our true character. Is there power in these? The greatest power possible, far greater than the power of any dictator or outward force. The human spirit has proven indomitable.

Tyranny's rule is always short-lived. The desire for freedom that is deeply implanted in human hearts cannot be denied or forcibly suppressed. The issue is not whether we have spiritual freedom, but what spirit will rule within us. Will it be the spirit of Divine truth or the spirit of the world? Will we choose the Lord for our king or Caesar? The Lord has revealed Himself anew for the New Church, bearing witness to the truth as never before in the Heavenly Doctrine of the church.

The Palm Sunday account is prophetic of a new and conscious reception of the Lord now possible for us. The New Church is named the New Jerusalem. While we have established organizations for the promotion of the Lord's church among men, the New Jerusalem is really in the individual heart. How does the Lord enter this New Jerusalem? His approach to us is symbolically pictured in the New Testament. There He rode upon the colt of a donkey with garments and branches strewed before Him. Thus He physically entered that city. To us this signifies something that can take place again and again in our personal life: the subordination and guidance of our rational mind by the Lord's teachings and the acknowledgment that Divine truths from the Word are the truths that should rule in our life. Palm Sunday takes place in the hidden kingdom of our spirit every time we are ready to receive the Lord. Let us pray for His promised coming. "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you. He is just and having salvation, lowly and riding on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Zech. 9:9). "You say rightly that I am a king ...Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice!" (John 18:37). Amen. *Lessons: John 18:28-40; 19:1-22; Apocalypse Explained 31:1, 3, 7.*