

“Wise Shifts in Perspective”

A Palm Sunday Sermon by the Rt. Rev. Peter Buss Jr.
Bryn Athyn Cathedral—April 2, 2023

“His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered...” (John 12:16)

“O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe...” (Luke 24:25)

What’s really going on? When we see the Lord riding into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday we know that it is the culmination of His ministry on earth. He knows, as He rides there, that the crucifixion and resurrection are immanent. Proclaiming Himself as King on that day was an integral part of the process.

A major shift was taking place at that time, orchestrated precisely by the Lord. The crowds on that day, knowing of His miracles and teaching, came to witness Him as the Messiah who was taking on the pageantry of kingship. They did know that He is a King, the Messiah foretold. What they didn’t know is that He was not to be the “King of Israel” in an earthly sense, as they proclaimed (John 12:13). So we note that they would celebrate Him that day only to go home disillusioned because He didn’t fulfill their worldly hopes.

Instead, the message of Palm Sunday, as we know, is that He is a different kind of King. As He would later say to Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). Yes, I am a King, but of a spiritual kingdom called heaven and the church.

The disciples themselves, there amongst the crowd, had a better chance of understanding this, but even they needed help. There’s a small detail within the Palm Sunday story that demonstrates how they were being awakened to something larger, something more enduring and powerful going on with the Lord than they had known. As they watched all the pageantry it says, “His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things were written about Him and that they had done these things to Him” (John 12:16). Do you see the shift in their perspective as they sequentially became aware of the Lord’s Divine plan and their own place in it?

It’s informative to fast forward a week to the story of the Road to Emmaus, because a very similar shift in perspective happens to two other people amongst the Lord’s disciples. They found themselves walking with the risen Lord without knowing it at first. Most of us know the story—of how Jesus got them to tell Him of the events they had all witnessed, including the story of Palm Sunday and early news of the empty tomb. They too failed to understand, saying “But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:21). Listen to what Jesus said to them—the way He invited them to rethink things: “O foolish ones and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory? And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets He expounded on them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself” (Luke 24:25-27). He shifted their perspective, a process that culminated later that day when He dined with them. “Then their eyes were opened and they knew Him” (Luke 24:31).

Other “shift in perspective” stories. I am engaged in a study of the ways the Lord consistently seeks to shift our perspective, just like He did with the disciples. It’s His work of leading us to attain wisdom. It’s an incredible lens through which to look at the Word. We encounter stories like Jacob’s dream of a ladder reaching to heaven with the Lord Himself at the top making a covenant with him. We hear him saying, “Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it!” (Genesis 28:16). Think of the change for Jacob, of fleeing for his life from his brother Esau, to having a sense of the Lord’s providence and plan for his life.

Or what of Elisha who calmed his servant when an enormous Syrian army surrounded them? “Do not fear,” he said, “for those who are with us are more than those who are with them” (2 Kings 6:16). Or how about Samuel—surely Samuel who spoke directly with the Lord would know what’s what. But when the Lord sent him to Jesse’s house to anoint the next king of Israel, we hear Him say, “Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature, because I have refused him. For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7).

So many times the Lord shifted people’s perspective, raising their thoughts to a spiritual way of viewing life: “You have heard that it was said to those of old... But I say to you...” (Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28, et al). “Enter by the narrow gate...” rather than the broad one (Matthew 7:13-14). “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it” (Mark 10:15). “He who is without sin among you let him cast a stone at her first” (John 8:7). “The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). “But she out of her poverty put in all that she had” (Mark 12:44). Recall also the message we have already heard today: “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36).

So much of this the people on Palm Sunday did not understand. Even the disciples were blind to a large portion of it until after the resurrection, when finally things began to fall into place for them. They all needed those consistent and repeated prompts from the Lord to think more deeply and wisely, to open their minds to consider the spiritual dimensions of life. And so do we.

In need of spiritual prompts. Why is that? So many reasons but listen to just three teachings from the Writings of the New Church or the Heavenly Doctrines.

We have trouble thinking beyond what we can see and touch. The first reminds us that we’re so often locked into this world, into what we can see and touch. It’s a teaching about our spirits, and that we live in human form after death, “clothed” it says, “in brilliant garments [and living in magnificent dwellings” (*Spiritual Experiences* 5684). But for people for whom this is a new concept it says: “Let them think from sense experience, that is to say from their body and its senses.... Will they not then stop there and finally deny?” Sounds like those many people watching the Lord ride into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. “However,” it continues, “Let people who can be drawn away from sensual and bodily things and be raised above these then think... [Then], for the first time, can they enter into wisdom” (*Spiritual Experiences* 5684). Isn’t it true that much of what the Lord offers is beyond the sight of our eyes or the worldly experience we’re born into? Love, safety in the Lord, lasting happiness, true fulfillment and contentment, peace. Wisdom is found in pursuing these things.

When things go wrong, it's often really hard to trust. Think again of the disciples, who had the best chance of trusting in the Lord. Jesus said to them just before He was captured, "All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night" (Mark 14:27). We may recall Peter boldly predicting that he would never stumble or deny the Lord—only to be humbled when later he did deny the Lord at the house of the high priest, and the rooster crowed (Mark 14:29-31, 66-72). With that in mind, as well as our own experiences of great turmoil in our lives, listen to this teaching:

As long as temptation lasts, people assume that the Lord is not present, for they are being harassed by evil genii, so harassed in fact that sometimes they have so great a feeling of hopelessness as scarcely to believe in the existence of any God at all. (*Arcana Caelestia* 840)

Many of us, sadly, know that feeling. But mercifully the Lord doesn't leave us there. This teaching continues, "Yet at such times the Lord is more present than those people can possibly believe. [And] once temptation subsides they receive comfort, believing for the first time that the Lord is present" (*Arcana Caelestia* 840). We think we know the Lord and believe in Him, but we know that will be tested.

We often think we know when we actually don't. In fact, that's a third thing we're taught that has us in a place of needing the Lord's spiritual prompts. We often think we know more than we do. Interestingly there is a paradox about wisdom known to the angels. We think of those people who live in heaven as some of the wisest and most regenerate or good human beings that exist. But listen to what *they* say of themselves.

Among the angels themselves, who possess a supreme light of intelligence and wisdom, holiness still dwells within *ignorance*, for they know and acknowledge that of themselves they know nothing and that whatever they do know comes from the Lord. (*Arcana Caelestia* 1557:2)

It goes on to make a general statement about us. "Anyone who does not acknowledge that there is an infinite number of things they do not know compared with what they do know cannot possess the holiness of angels" (*Ibid.*). Another passage describes this wisdom of angels with an analogy: what they know "compared with what they do not are as a drop of water is to the ocean" (*True Christian Religion* 387). Wow.

How often do we think we know when we don't—think we know what's going on with someone else when we really have no idea, or believe we've got it all figured out only to find that someone challenges us with questions that we can't answer, or feel confident in the plan that we have for our lives only to encounter a twist of life that requires us to rethink things and turn anew to the Lord for help? Again we can think of those people laying their palms and clothes before the Lord. They thought they saw the Messiah coming into the capital city. They did, but their understanding of that was seriously compromised.

"True wisdom." The Lord's effort, however, is to lead us toward greater and greater states of wisdom. He can cause us to learn and grow. He can shift our perspective in helpful ways. He is always willing to work with us. He is always inviting us to the next shift in our perspective that has us cooperate with Him more fully and wisely.

Earlier in the service we heard three short statements about the true wisdom, which give us direction on how we can cooperate.

“True human wisdom,” we read, “consists in perceiving the existence of God, the nature of God, and what pertains to God. This is what the Divine truth of the Word teaches” (*Apocalypse Revealed* 243). Do we hear the call to turn to the Lord, who rode into Jerusalem, who died on the cross, who rose again on Easter Sunday—all to be our Savior and Redeemer? If we do nothing else as a result of our time in the Lord’s presence today, than renew our commitment to turn to Him and devote ourselves more fully to Him, we will have discovered the single most powerful means to true wisdom there is. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Psalm 111:10).

We read again, “[T]rue wisdom is to see what is conducive to anyone’s life to eternity, and to determine oneself according to that, which is done when people not only know these things and perceive them with their understanding, but also will and do them” (*Apocalypse Explained* 338). Isn’t that what people had the opportunity to consider by means of the Lord’s teachings? “My kingdom is not of this world.” Heaven is the place to which the Lord is leading us. Spiritual life, and the things of spiritual life, are primary. Think spiritually, not naturally, and we’ll be wise—or at least on the path to wisdom. And if we *live* spiritually as this passage requires, with the things of eternal life in mind, we can come into true wisdom. Not only that but we can come into true happiness, for living in these ways is what allows the Lord to bless us.

Finally we read, “Few if any people know how a person is led to true wisdom. Intelligence is not wisdom but it leads to wisdom, for having an understanding of what truth and good are is not the same as being a true and good person; but being wise is. Wisdom can be used only in reference to a person’s life, to what kind of person they are” (*Arcana Caelestia* 1555:2). What kind of people do we want to be? Lord based? Trusting? Other-oriented? Wise? Humble? Kind-hearted and generous? Free of some of the hereditary evils that plague us presently? Able to share Word-based perspectives to others that have truly made a positive difference for us? Content? Useful? All these and more can be ours from the Lord to the extent that we turn to Him and orient ourselves to His path.

Our next steps. Like the Lord did for those on that day that He rode into Jerusalem, He is constantly striving to shift our perspective—to help us grow in the wisdom of life. Like the disciples, there will be times that we “[do] not understand these things at first” but later “remember” and have it all fall into place for us (John 12:16). Like those other disciples on the road to Emmaus, the Lord will be walking with us through life, even when we don’t know it or acknowledge it, listening to us describe our confusion and sadness, our challenges and frustrations. Always, He will seek for ways to lead us to greater levels of understanding, sometimes even chiding us gently: “O foolish ones and slow of heart to believe...” (Luke 24:25). But to the extent that we are paying attention, and make the commitment to strive for the wisdom He so generously offers, there will be times when we come to know of His presence and providence in our lives. Our eyes can be opened, and our hearts can burn within us as we come to realize that our Lord is with us always, and has a plan for our lives that stretches into an eternity of happiness, to the extent that we are wise enough to follow. **Amen.**

Readings from the Lord's Word: John 12:12-16; Luke 24:17-21,25-27; *Apocalypse Explained* 338; *Apocalypse Revealed* 243; *Arcana Coelestia* 1555:2.

John 12

¹² The next day a great multitude that had come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, ¹³ took branches of palm trees and went out to meet Him, and cried out:

“Hosanna!
‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!’
The King of Israel!”

¹⁴ Then Jesus, when He had found a young donkey, sat on it; as it is written:

¹⁵ “Fear not, daughter of Zion;
Behold, your King is coming,
Sitting on a donkey’s colt.”

¹⁶ His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things were written about Him and that they had done these things to Him.

Luke 24

¹⁷ And He said to them, “What kind of conversation is this that you have with one another as you walk and are sad?”

¹⁸ Then the one whose name was Cleopas answered and said to Him, “Are You the only stranger in Jerusalem, and have You not known the things which happened there in these days?”

¹⁹ And He said to them, “What things?”

So they said to Him, “The things concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a Prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰ and how the chief priests and our rulers delivered Him to be condemned to death, and crucified Him. ²¹ But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel. Indeed, besides all this, today is the third day since these things happened....

²⁵ Then He said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! ²⁶ Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?” ²⁷ And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.

***Apocalypse Explained* 338**

[T]rue wisdom is to see what is conducive to anyone’s life to eternity, and to determine oneself according to that, which is done when people not only know these things and perceive them with their understanding, but also will and do them.

Apocalypse Revealed 243

A human being in the Word symbolizes wisdom, because the human being was born to receive wisdom from the Lord and become an angel. The wiser someone is, therefore, the more human they are. True human wisdom consists in perceiving the existence of God, the nature of God, and what pertains to God. This is what the Divine truth of the Word teaches.

Arcana Caelestia 1555:2

Few if any people know how a person is led to true wisdom. Intelligence is not wisdom but it leads to wisdom, for having an understanding of what truth and good are is not the same as being a true and good person; but being wise is. Wisdom can be used only in reference to a person's life, to what kind of person they are.