

**APRIL 9, 2017 PALM SUNDAY**

**ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH**

**JOHN 12: 1-18**

**“A CHOICE TO MAKE”**

On that first Palm Sunday there was lots of joy and excitement. The Lord was coming into town riding on a donkey! A big crowd gathered to welcome Him. They waved palms, an ancient symbol of loyalty to one's ruler.

The crowd went all out for Jesus that day. They shouted to Him, "Hosanna", which means, "Save us, Lord" and they called Him "the Son of David", meaning that they were acknowledging Him as their king. It looked like Jesus Christ was finally succeeding. Everyone was for Him now! Victory!

But the crowd's opinion changed by the time Friday rolled around, only 5 days later. Most of that Palm Sunday crowd went from being fans of Jesus Christ to being enemies of Him. They turned into a Jesus-hating mob. Most of the same people who hollered "Hosanna" on Sunday yelled "Crucify Him" on Friday.

The commitment they made to Him on Sunday had obviously been pretty shallow. On Sunday, they cheered. On Friday, they jeered. On Sunday, they wanted to crown Him. On Friday, they wanted to kill Him.

And once He was on the cross, they hated Him even more. After all, how could the Messiah, the King, the Son of David end up executed on a cross like a common criminal? So they concluded Jesus was fake. And so they mocked Him all the more.

But not everyone mocked Him on Friday. There was His mother, there was St. John....they didn't mock Him! And there was a thief.....

Two men were crucified together with our Lord. Two thieves, two criminals. We'll look some at one of them in this sermon. He hung on a cross right next to Christ. There was nothing good about the man. He was a robber and a rebel, a criminal. He had been caught and tried and found guilty. And he was sentenced to death. And being a common criminal, he was sentenced to the horrible execution method called crucifixion. A slow and agonizing death....

As the thief slowly died, he watched the man on the cross next to him. After all, plenty of time when you're hanging on a cross! (Actually, that was one of the worst things about crucifixion—how long it took. The idea of crucifixion was to cause as much agony for as long as possible. Hours and hours and hours....) And so, as he hung there, he spent time examining Jesus.

Jesus looked like any other man dying on a cross. Same kind of nails....Same shedding of blood.... Same difficulty breathing.... Obviously, the same tortuous pain. But somehow the thief noticed something different about the man on the middle cross. He watched how Jesus acted and he listened to what He said. He heard the Lord pray to His Father, He watched Him take care of His mother even while He was dying, he heard Him pray that His executioners be forgiven.

The thief watched and listened and thought about all this. He came to realize this man was different. He came to realize the man wasn't a criminal like he was. He was innocent. And the thief realized Jesus was a king. And not just any king, but the King of creation and the Lord of all.

Then the thief made an incredible leap of faith and said to Jesus---"Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." An amazing leap of faith to come to believe that the man on the middle cross was the Lord of the universe. Such faith canceled out his sinful past. And Jesus replied to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Because of his faith, and in spite of his sinful life, this man is often called "the Good Thief". How ironic that the religious leaders of that day (whom we would usually think should be the examples for us to follow) went against Christ. And that it was a criminal who believed and who became our example to follow. Such are the workings of our mysterious God!

And that thief is our good example. For at every liturgy, as we prepare to receive the Holy Eucharist, we say and sing that we wish to be like that criminal. As the words of the pre-Communion prayer say---"neither will I give Thee a kiss as did Judas, *but like the thief* will I confess Thee: remember me, O Lord, in Thy Kingdom." A thief who became a Good Thief---he is the one we should emulate and imitate.

Each time we sing or say that prayer, which is each time we receive Holy Communion, we are saying, "I want to be like that thief. I want to make the same decision as did the thief. I want to decide for Jesus Christ, so that He will remember me in His Kingdom, just like He remembered the thief."

Choices. Decisions. We all have to make them. On Palm Sunday, the religious leaders chose against Jesus. They were already plotting against Him. On Palm Sunday, the crowd chose for Jesus. They showed it by waving palms and yelling "Hosanna!". But most of that crowd changed their minds on Friday and then made a bad decision, shown by their new shout---"Crucify Him!".

The crowd made a bad choice on Friday. But the thief made a good choice.

May we make the same choice the thief made. May we, like him, believe that the man on the middle cross is the Son of God, the King, the Lord. May we say, like the thief, "Remember me, O Lord, when Thou comest into Thy Kingdom."

Some may say that they have never really had to make a real, sharp decision about Jesus Christ. That could be you..... Perhaps you were baptized as a baby---and that's a very good thing. Always thank your parents and godparents for doing that! And perhaps you were brought up as a Christian. Again, a very good thing---thank your parents for that, too! And perhaps you've never had to face a real choice about whether or not to keep on as a Christian believer.

But each of us at some point really do have to make our own decision. An individual decision as to whether or not I wish to live for the man on the center cross. Often times, such a decision has to be made when there is some crisis in our life. But maybe the time for decision can happen when everything is actually going pretty smoothly. But the time

will come----maybe when you're young, maybe when you're old, maybe somewhere in the middle. At some point, you yourself will have to really choose, not just drift along based on decisions your parents, friends, etc. have made. You will have to decide, "What do *I* believe?"

If you haven't yet really made that personal choice, Holy Week is a great time to do it. The perfect time for the biggest decision of all----should I believe in Jesus Christ like the thief did?

Take the step, make a decision---stake your whole life (in this world and the next) on it. Make your carrying of a palm today truly a sign of your personal loyalty to Jesus Christ. Follow the thief's example and say to Jesus Christ with all your heart---"Remember me, O Lord, when Thou comest into Thy Kingdom." And He will remember you. And you will be part of His Kingdom forever.

