

THE PROCESSION OF PALM SUNDAY IN THE BIBLE AND THE LITURGY

Rodolph Yanney, M.D.

"O Lord grant salvation! . . . Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord . . . Join in procession with leafy boughs up to the horns of the altar." (Ps. 118:25-27 NAB)

We have here the picture of the people of God greeting their triumphant King and Saviour, with palm branches in their hands, and shouting "Hosanna . . . Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." We meet it in the shadows of the Old Testament (in its types and its prophecies); we meet it in the images of the New Testament; and finally we find its fulfillment in the Parousia. The realities of the heavenly Church are lived sacramentally by the visible Church which participates in the messianic procession not only in the feast of Palm Sunday, but also in every Eucharist.

Old Testament Shadows:

(1) The Feast of Tabernacles - type of the Parousia

The most joyous of all the festivals in Israel was that of the *Feast of Tabernacles*. It was the third and last of the great annual festivals, at which every male had to appear before the Lord in the place which He should choose. (Deut. 16:16). The first feast, *Passover*, was at the beginning of the harvest. It pointed back to the birth of Israel in their Exodus from Egypt, and forward to the true Paschal mystery - the Exodus of Christ to His Father. *Pentecost* was the second feast, at the time of the corn-harvest. Its origin for Israel was connected with the giving of the law on Mount Sinai; and it pointed forward to the pouring of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. The harvest-thanksgiving of the *Feast of Tabernacles* reminded Israel, on the one hand, of their dwelling in booths in the wilderness, while, on the other hand, it pointed to the final harvest when all nations should be gathered unto the Lord.¹ The prophet Zechariah, in his description of the "latter-day" glory, connected the conversion of all nations with the Feast of Tabernacles (Zech. 14:16-21). The Feast of Tabernacles is the only type in the Old Testament which has not yet been fulfilled.

As directed by the Law (Lev. 23:40), each worshipper coming into the Temple during the seven festive days had to carry an aethrog (or citron) in his left hand, and

a lulab in the right. The latter was a palm branch, tied to myrtle and willow branches on either side. During the morning sacrifice each day a priest, accompanied by a joyous procession with music, brought water in a golden pitcher from the pool of Siloam. This he poured into the base of the altar while the Hallel (Psalms 113-118) was sung. When the choir came to the words of the last psalm, "O give thanks to the Lord", "O work now salvation, Jehovah", and "O give thanks to the Lord" (Ps. 118:1, 25 and 29), all the worshippers, including children, shook their lulabs towards the altar. The priests then formed in procession and made the circuit of the altar singing, "O then, now work salvation, Jehovah! O Jehovah give prosperity!" (Ps. 118:25). But on the seventh, "that great day of the feast" (John 7:37) they made this circuit seven times.² On account of the sevenfold circuit of the altar with "Hosannah", the day was called in the Rabbinical writings, "The Day of the Great Hosannah."

(2) Palm branches as a sign of triumph

When Simon Maccabaeus regained the citadel of Jerusalem in 142 B.C., "the Jews entered it with praise and *palm branches*, and with harps and cymbals and stringed instruments, and with hymns and songs, because a great enemy had been crushed and removed from Israel" (1 Macc. 13:51 RSV; cp. 1 Macc. 13:41 & 2 Macc. 10:7).

Entrance of our Lord into Jerusalem.

"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass." (Zech. 9:9).

"Took branches of palm trees, and went forth to meet him, and cried Hosanna: Blessed is the King of Israel that cometh in the name of the Lord" (John 12:13).

*"Hosanna in the highest: This is the King of Israel.
Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord of powers.
He who sits upon the Cherubim: Appears today in Jerusalem.
Riding upon a colt in great glory: Surrounded by choruses of angels.
Along the road, they spread garments: And from the trees they cut branches.*

*Crying in hymns: Hosanna, Son of David.
Today are fulfilled the sayings: From the prophecies and wisdom.
As Zechariah has foretold and said: A prophecy about Jesus Christ. "*
(Response to the Gospels, in the liturgy of Palm Sunday.)

When the kingdom of Judah was destroyed, and its capital ruined, when Solomon's Temple became a thing of the past, and the nation led into the Babylonian captivity,

the Jews longed for a return to Jerusalem, for a new kingdom, where a son of David would rule them and for a new Temple. They did return from Babylon and built the Temple, but in comparison to the first one it was a nothing (Hag. 2:3). At this time the prophet Haggai carried the message of the Lord to the remnants of the People, "Fear ye not. For thus saith the Lord of hosts: Yet once, it is a little while, and I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land; And I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory . . . The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former . . . and in this place will I give peace, saith the Lord of hosts." (Hag. 2:5-9).

On Palm Sunday many Jews saw in our Lord the promised Messiah. If their ancestors followed the Hasmonean kings (the Maccabees) who were descendants of Aaron and not David, they now followed Christ the true Son of David, and as the older generation escorted Simon Maccabaeus to Jerusalem, their sons carried palm branches in the same manner and went forth to meet our Lord, who was riding on an ass as the Prophet Zechariah had foretold in his description of the Messianic King. Holding the palm branches, the crowd sang the two verses from Psalm 118, "Hosanna . . . Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." The wavering of the "lulab" to the song of Hosanna, and the two benedictions of the Psalm are parts of the liturgy of the Feast of Tabernacles. The meaning is clear: Christ is the Messiah in which is fulfilled the Hosanna and the triumph which the rites of the feast pointed to.

But Christ never accepted the title Messiah in the sense of a worldly king as the Jews understood it to mean. He even gave the Jews a glimpse of the real fulfillment of what they said. It should be in His second coming - the Parousia, "Ye shall not see me henceforth till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord." (Matt. 23:39).

Actually the title which Christ preferred when speaking to others was the Son of Man - which refers to His Parousia, "one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven . . . And there were given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations and languages shall serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed." (Dan. 7:13, 14).

Christ did not look like a King entering His city on an ass, because His kingdom is not of this world. Christ did not enter Jerusalem to get an earthly kingdom at once. It was only the first step in His exodus to the far country where He ought to ensure His kingdom. He "spake a parable, because he was nigh to Jerusalem, and because they thought that the kingdom of God should immediately appear. He said therefore, A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for him a kingdom, and to return." (Luke 19:11, 12).

Palm Sunday in the Liturgy of the Coptic Church

Palm Sunday is one of the seven major feasts of our Lord. The Church celebrates it after the solemn days of Lent and before starting the Pascha, or the Passover week. This is reflected in the liturgy. The *lenten* melodies and tunes give way to the *shaneeni* tune which echoes the rejoicing of the Church on Palm Sunday, after which the songs follow the mournful *adreebi* tune of the Holy Week.

Before vespers, on the evening after Lazarus' Saturday, all Christians take palm branches, and olive branches, which they shape in the form of a cross and carry to the cell of the Patriarch or Bishop. From there the priests, in their full priestly garments, with censers in their hands, together with the deacons, escort the Patriarch to the church while singing, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord . . .". After the procession reaches the church altar, the prayers of *vespers* start, followed by "*raising of the incense*".

During the evening and the morning services of *raising of the incense* special doxologies and songs for Palm Sunday are chanted and the clergy and deacons make the circuit of the altar three times while they sing, "*Amen: Kiriye eleyson*". Then, standing in front of the altar, they sing the *chant of Palm Sunday*, '*Evlogimenos*' (i.e. Blessed is He who comes . . . etc. . . .). This is probably the most majestic of the Coptic Church songs. It is used in the liturgy only on this day, and also for the reception of kings, patriarchs and bishops.

In the morning, this altar procession serves only as an introduction for the main "*Procession of the Cross*". (The name is taken from the other occasion where this procession is performed, which is the feast of the Cross.) All the Church (clergy and congregation) combines in this procession inside the church that takes about a whole hour, with prayers, readings from the gospels, and chants.³ Then follows the Divine Liturgy which includes different chants and responses that portray the occasion, all in the same shaneeni tune.

The Parousia

Amidst the glories of Palm Sunday, it is hard to believe the words of St. Paul, "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face." (1 Cor. 13:12).

However, this fact was attested to by Christ when He said, "For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord" (Matt. 23:39). The same teaching appears in the liturgy of Palm Sunday, when the people respond toward the end of the *Procession of the Cross*, "At Your Second Coming: That austere coming: Let us not tremble hear: That I do not know you."

The historical entry of Christ into Jerusalem, with all the world going after Him (John 12:19), is only the image of the heavenly City of God as described by St. John in the Book of Revelation,

"After this (i.e. after sealing the servants of God on their foreheads, which is a frank allusion to Baptism.) I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude which no man could

number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes (*a second reference to Baptism*), and palms in their hands . . . These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb (*a third reference to Baptism, as founded on the Pascha of Christ and where people pass over sin, the great tribulation*) (Rev. 7:9 and 14).

We find here the eschatological fulfillment of the Feast of Tabernacles, of which we have seen only a glimpse in the procession of Palm Sunday. Instead of the huts built of branches we have the "eternal tabernacles" (Luke 16:9, Rev. 7:15). Instead of the rite of water pouring, we have the springs of living waters (Rev. 7:17) which stand for the outpouring of the Spirit (John 7:38). We have the same procession, with the lulab and the hosanna. Commenting on the words of the Procession Psalm, (Ps. 118:27), St. Gregory of Nyssa sees in it a description of the restored choir of all creation, where men unite once more their voices with those of the angels. The angelic creation appears to him as symbolized by the horns of the altar.⁴ It is significant, that this same verse is the Vespers' Psalm for Palm Sunday in the Coptic liturgy.

The procession of priests and Israelites in the Temple of Jerusalem was the shadow. The procession of the people and children following Christ in His entry to Jerusalem was the image. The procession of the Church in Palm Sunday is a liturgic expression. But the reality of the Parousia when men and angels unite in a circular procession around the altar is described in the Book of Revelation by St. John,

" . . . I beheld . . . a great multitude . . . of all nations, and kindreds, and people . . . And all the angels stood round about the throne, and about the elders and the four beasts, and fell before the throne on their faces, and worshipped God." (Rev. 7:9, 11).

The Coming of Christ in the Liturgy

But the Church does not have to wait for the Parousia to share in the heavenly worship. Each time the Church celebrates the Divine Liturgy she finds herself at the moment of the second coming of Christ with angels and archangels, at the last trumpet. In the liturgy, the Church uses the same *messianic verse*, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord", to salute Christ when He comes to us both in the Liturgy of the Word and in the Eucharistic Liturgy.

(1) During the "Procession of the Lamb"

In the introductory part of the Coptic liturgy, before the bread and wine are put on the altar, the priest and deacons make a procession around it, while the congregation, standing in awe, sings the words of the messianic psalm (Ps. 118: 24-26).

This part of the liturgy corresponds to the "*Great Entrance*" in the liturgy of St. John Chrysostom used in the Eastern Orthodox churches. The priest and deacon enter

through the royal door carrying the elements, while the congregation sings the Cherubic hymn,

"We who mystically represent the Cherubim, sing the thrice holy hymn to the life-giving Trinity. Let us put away all earthly care, so that we may receive the King of All, invisibly escorted by the angelic hosts. Alleluia."

At this moment, as Evelyn Underhill describes, "Christ Himself, 'invisibly escorted by Angels', enters with the oblation into the Holy Place . . . From this time onwards Christ is present: it is He Priest no less than Victim, who celebrates His mysterious Supper."⁵

(2) *The Liturgy of the Word.*

The gospel is read in a Coptic church with all the people standing in reverence, with all the lights of the church on, and with deacons carrying candles surrounding the priest as he reads; always with the introducing verse, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord."

(3) *In the beginning of the Eucharistic liturgy*, following the angelic hymn, the Coptic liturgy of St. Gregory proceeds,

"Hosanna in the Highest. Blessed is He who came and who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the Highest."

(4) *During Communion*, the people shout with the same Hosanna when the priest carries the consecrated Host, the Body of Christ towards them.

So the scene of the Feast of Tabernacles is fulfilled in the successive Parousias of our Lord - in Palm Sunday, with every Christian at his Baptism, in every Eucharist and in the final Parousia. St. Athanasius the Great summarizes all this saying,

"Let us brethren, who have received the vineyard from the Saviour, and are invited to the heavenly banquet, in as much as the feast is now drawing nigh, take the branches of the palm trees, and proving conquerors of sin, let us too like those, who on that occasion went to meet the Saviour, make ourselves ready by our conduct, both to meet Him when He comes, and to go with Him and partake of the immortal food, and from thence live eternally in the heavens."⁶

References and Notes

1. A. Edersheim: *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services*. Boston, 1881. P. 232-234.
2. *Ibid.* P. 241, 242.
3. The study of the Procession of the Cross is beyond the scope of this article.
4. Jean Danielou, S. J.: *the Bible and the Liturgy*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1956. P. 346-7.
5. Evelyn Underhill: *Worship*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1936. P. 154.
6. Festal letters of St. Athanasius: 28. In: *NPNF*, second series, Vol. IV. P. 550.