

SUNDAY THEOSIS #5-56

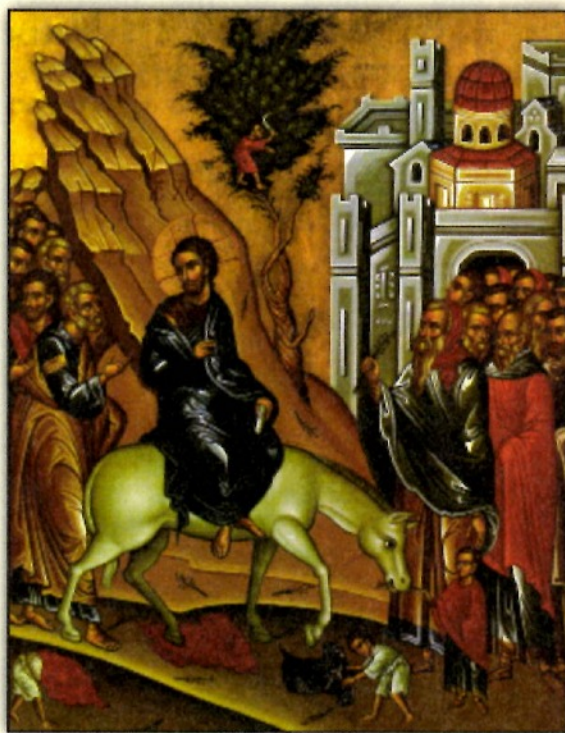
Theology of Icons

By Archpriest Lawrence Cross

The Entry of the Lord into Jerusalem (Palm Sunday)

People everywhere! All you nations! Everyone come forth! Behold the king of heaven as he enters Jerusalem, the holy city, seated on the colt of an ass as if on a lofty throne. Come behold him whom Isaiah once saw; behold the bridegroom of the new Zion, for he comes in the flesh to save us from our sins. And to celebrate his pure and undefiled nuptials, the innocent children gather to sing his praises, and so with them we also greet him, exclaiming: To him who grants great mercy, Hosanna in the highest!¹

The sources or inspiration for the icon of the Entry of the Lord into Jerusalem are Scriptural, coming from both the Jewish and Christian writings. The Prophet Zechariah writes, "Rejoice greatly O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass."² Each of the four evangelists tells of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem.³



Military commanders of the ancient world would make their triumphant entrance into a city riding on their warhorse. In this "Adventus" (Latin: 'the coming'), the proud commander would allow himself to be cheered by the people, and triumphant soldiers bearing weapons would be followed by prisoners and the spoils of war. Compared with such a display of power, the contrast to The Entry Into Jerusalem is striking. Jesus does not surround himself with armed guards but is attended by disciples who barely understand the intentions of the Divine Master. Such insights came later, at the Pentecost event. Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey.

1 Evdokimov *Light From The East*, 41.

2 Zech 9:9.

3 Mt 21:1-11; Mk 11:1-11; Lk 19: 28-40 and Jn 12:12-19.

He who sits upon the throne of the cherubim, for our sake sits upon a foal; and coming to his voluntary Passion, today he hears the children cry "Hosanna!" while the crowd replies, "O Son of David, make haste to save those whom you have created."⁴



Icons depicting this event have a triumphal and festive quality which gives a foretaste of Easter Joy in the midst of Great Lent.⁵ This festive character is portrayed through the brightly coloured cloaks spread out before the procession. The majestic Saviour is flanked by the apostles and townsfolk and rides upon

the donkey as if seated on a throne. The donkey is depicted as a meek creature by its lowered head. It is perfect for a ruler with no army, no weapons, and no armour. Christ is the central figure in the icon; all the action takes place around him. The Saviour's head is usually turned to the apostles, but occasionally, Jesus is shown to be looking at the townsfolk. One hand is raised in a position of blessing, the other holding a scroll, a reference to the Pantocrator Christ Icon.

The apostles and disciples (in some icons only two are portrayed, one being Saint Peter) are depicted deep in conversation, and their hand gestures indicate that their conversation is of great importance. Above them is shown a mountain often described as Golgotha by many commentators. Opposite the disciples the townsfolk are portrayed. Even though their eyes are turned to the Saviour, they are depicted as an unstable crowd who only a few days later will turn against the Christ. Above them one can see the city of Jerusalem, portrayed in either white or red. In between the city and the mountain opposite it, a tree is given prominence. This is a visual reminder that a tree will become the cross that Jesus will have to carry in a short while. Sometimes a child is depicted in the tree, sometimes cutting off a branch with an axe, or sometimes waving a palm that has just been chopped off.

The immediate cause of the welcome given to Jesus is the raising of Lazarus from the dead when "the great crowd

4 Palm Sunday Matins, Tone 8.

5 Ouspensky and Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, 176.

that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting, 'Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord – the King of Israel!' (John 12:12-13). The palm branch, a symbol of joy and feasting, was used to welcome people of high rank.⁶ As a symbol of valour, the palm of victory was presented to the conqueror. Here, one of the townsfolk is shown holding a palm branch, but it is the children in the icon who place their cloaks on the ground. Children play an important role in the icon of the Entry into Jerusalem.⁷ Even though the evangelists do not specifically mention them, iconographers have on this occasion used their imagination to portray the crowd with children. It is reasonable to assume that children would have been part of the "great crowd" celebrating the feast and so, in the icon, children are portrayed as placing their cloaks on the ground, like rolling out the red carpet, or waving palm branches. One is reminded of the passage in 2 Kings, "Then hurriedly they all took their cloaks and spread them on the bare steps; and they blew the trumpet, and proclaimed, "Jehu is king" (2 Kings 9:13). Also, Christ's teaching is recalled: "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it" (Mk 10:15).

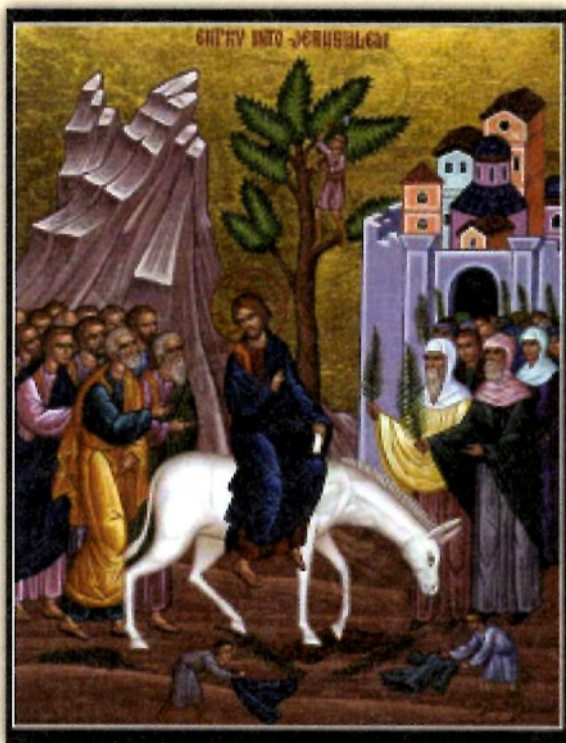
According to the spiritual writer John

6 Ouspensky and Lossky *The Meaning of Icons*, 176.

7 Ouspensky and Lossky *The Meaning of Icons*, 177.

Cassian (c.365-435) The Entry into Jerusalem may be interpreted on four different levels. The first, literal level refers to the historic event, namely that of Christ who rode in procession into the Jewish capital Jerusalem and was acclaimed as king by the crowd a few days before his crucifixion. On the allegorical or typological level Jerusalem stands for the Church that Christ established by his death and resurrection, and with which he unites himself through word and sacraments during every divine service. On the moral or tropological level, Jerusalem is the individual human soul that receives Christ in a spiritual way. On the last, analogical level Jerusalem refers to the eternal abodes in the world to come – the heavenly Jerusalem where





the Kingdom of God will blossom in its fullness.⁸

St Epiphanius of Cyprus further explains the icon:

Why did Christ, who previously walked everywhere, go up to Jerusalem riding on an animal? To show us that He would be raised up on the cross and glorified on it. What does the town represent? The disposition of the rebellious spirit of mankind evicted from Palestine, to whom Christ sent two disciples, namely, the two Testaments both Old and New. What does the donkey signify? Without doubt, the synagogue that led its life beneath a burden and on

the back of whose laws Christ would sit one day in triumph. What does the colt prefigure? The unbridled pagans whom no one could tame: neither the Law, nor fear, nor angel, nor prophet, nor the Scriptures, but only God, the Word. (quoted by Monk Gregory)⁹

The Eucharist is a prelude to the Church's entry into the Jerusalem that comes from above. To underline this, the Byzantine liturgy sings the verse "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" immediately before Holy Communion.¹⁰ The resonances of the Feast of the Entry into Jerusalem are also heard in the verse:

Buried with you in Baptism, O Christ our God, we have been deemed worthy of immortal life thanks to your Resurrection, and we cry out this hymn of praise: Hosanna in the highest, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.¹¹

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⁹ Cited in Quenot, *The Icon*, 61.

¹⁰ Evdokimov, *Light from the East*, 39.

¹¹ Evdokimov, *Light from the East*, 39.