

Children's Talk and Sermon Notes
for Sunday, 14 February

Children's Talk: Preparation and Patience

How would you prepare if I told you that a guest was coming to visit later today? You might clean up. Or make a plan about what you would do together. Or lay out all your toys. If you're a little older you might make sure you had good snacks or everything you needed for a good time.

But what if I told you a guest was coming to visit a year from now? Would you do anything to get ready? It would be a lot harder, wouldn't it? And you would only have to start getting ready that early if it was a very important guest, and if you had to plan special things to do with them. But even then, it is hard to prepare for things that seem so far away.

The most important person we can prepare for is the Lord Himself. Hundreds of years ago, people did not know about the Lord, and He had not yet lived on Earth and taught people who He was. People knew He was coming though, so they needed to prepare and get ready. The Lord chose a man name John to help people get ready:

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the Prophets:

“Behold, I send My messenger before Your face,
Who will prepare Your way before You.”

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the LORD;
Make His paths straight.’”

John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. ⁵ Then all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.

Now John was clothed with camel's hair and with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, “There comes One after me who is mightier than I, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose. I indeed baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” (Mark 1:1-8)

Before John even showed up, people had to wait hundreds of years. And then when John did show up they had to wait longer for Jesus to come. And even when Jesus came, it still took time for them to realize who He was and for Him to do everything He needed to. But even though it took so long, and the people at the time probably felt like the time was a long way off, it was very important that John helped them prepare. And he helped them do that by getting them to notice the mistakes and evil things they were doing, and to stop doing them. That's called repentance. And when people repent it prepares for the Lord to come and to bring heavenly happiness and joy.

But sometimes that heavenly joy and happiness that the Lord brings seems so far off that preparing right now just doesn't seem worth it. When you are having a bad day it can feel so far away that it isn't worth preparing for it, so you do whatever you want, even if it hurts someone. Or perhaps you realize that you've developed a bad habit, but it can wait; you'll work on that later, when you're older. But the best time to start preparing is today. Even for things that seem like you can put off for

forever. The Lord is like a most important guest. Make sure you start getting ready now!

Preparing for Easter: the Road to Jerusalem

A Sermon by Pastor Joel Christian Glenn

14 February, 2021

When an event is approaching, we know that we need to prepare ahead of time. We don't just wake up on the day of and begin planning then. This is true of holidays too, and we see it especially with Christmas. You can't escape the Christmas lights and decorations, the Christmas songs all around, the movies on Netflix, the time off and the onset of summer all focus our minds on the holiday for weeks. And hopefully, all that external stuff reminds us to look inward and also prepare spiritually, by making space in our hearts for the Lord to be born.

Now that's Christmas. But for better or for worse, there is much less fanfare in the lead up to Easter, and as such we probably spend less time preparing for it, not just outwardly but spiritually as well. You might even now be thinking, "wait, is it almost Easter?! I had no idea!" Don't worry, Easter is still pretty far off (7 weeks, in fact), but the time from Ash Wednesday (17 February this year) until Easter Sunday is generally seen as a time of preparation for the holiday. In many traditions this time is called Lent. So rather than having Easter sneak up on us this year we are going to talk about it now and give some thought to how we might meaningfully prepare over the next several weeks.

If we want to know how to get ready for Easter we should look to the Word to find out what preceded the Lord's death and resurrection. This is not as clear cut as it might seem. We could look to Palm Sunday, the Sunday before Easter on which Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey. Or we could look back further, all the way to His birth. After all, Jesus' life from beginning to end was a continuous march to conquer and overcome the hells, culminating in Easter. There isn't a correct answer *per se*, but there is an interesting middle ground. In the Gospel of Mark there are a handful of indications of when Jesus began his final journey to Jerusalem and the stories that take place along the way. Because we so often read these stories out of context I hadn't taken notice of these references before, but they begin a couple of chapters before Palm Sunday is recounted in this particular Gospel.

The first reference places Jesus travelling through Galilee, the area in which He practiced most of His ministry. Then He set His face towards Jerusalem, and the dire implications of that journey. In this passage, although they take the road to Jerusalem, the city itself was still a long way off, perhaps even days.

Now they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was going before them; and they were amazed. And as they followed they were afraid. Then He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them the things that would happen to Him: "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death and deliver Him to the Gentiles; and they will mock Him, and scourge Him, and spit on Him, and kill Him. And the third day He will rise again." (Mark 10:32)

You can well imagine why the disciples were afraid. They were embarking on a journey that would result in their Lord and Master's death, and perhaps even their own. They were not natives of Jerusalem, and were leaving behind their homes in Galilee.

Understanding the geography and history of this journey reinforces the spiritual significance. Galilee was an area in the North of Israel, to the West and South of the Sea of Galilee. The sea itself is below sea level. Culturally it was a backwater. Judea, which Jesus entered to get to Jerusalem was further South. To get there He passed down the Jordan River, descending lower and lower to almost the lowest point on Earth at the dead sea, to a city called Jericho. From Jericho the road then ascends the hills and mountains to Jerusalem, the great city of Israel. Jerusalem was the cultural opposite of Galilee: it was the city of the great kings of Israel and Judah, the location of the Temple itself and the centre of all Jewish worship. In short, Galilee was away from things but safe; Jerusalem was the heart and soul of the land, and going there at this point was a guarantee of Jesus' death.

These locations and the travelling from to the other carries spiritual significance as well. Galilee, far removed from the centre, was a place that stands for outer things, external things, things unrelated to deep spiritual matters, and so on. This is the state that we spend most of our lives. We are not constantly fixed on spiritual things: we have to live life and take out the trash and pay taxes and so on. It's an okay state of mind to have. But it can also feel all too safe and comfortable; so much so that we don't take the time to push towards deeper things.

Those deeper things are represented by Judea and Jerusalem. Overall Judea stands for heavenly love and Jerusalem the most important teachings of the Church. In this case, of course, they stand for the opposite; in other words, a selfish love and the entrenched ideas that justify that love. These are the things we would rather not have to grapple with. Just let them lie under the surface and ignore them; life is easier without having to think about them. Consider the fear of the disciples as they walked towards Jerusalem and certain death: wouldn't it be safer to remain in Galilee? And likewise with us: wouldn't it be safer to deal with the day-to-day, mundane activities of life instead of deep-seated spiritual issues? In one sense, yes, absolutely. In the short term anyway. But without going through with these dangerous explorations of our true nature, we can never have the true spiritual triumph and blessing that are represented in Easter. I love that Jesus' journey was both a descent and an ascent: a descent into the bowels of the Earth, some of the lowest dry land anywhere in the world; and then an ascent up to what should have been the pinnacle of worshipping the Lord. When we descend into the low and dark parts of our lives, we also have a chance to ascend to a deep and abiding love.

But what does this have to do with preparing for Easter? I'm certainly not suggesting you spend the next seven weeks in deep spiritual angst. You couldn't possibly function and do that all at once, all the time. Rather, as a step of preparation for that kind of inner work, I would suggest adding something to your daily routine that pushes you to think more spiritually and do more self-reflection; or subtracting something from your routine that takes away from your ability to notice the spiritual work you need to do. These don't have to be big or over the top. They are not in themselves the destination; they are the road though that leads to those deeper struggles and fights. The road that leads to the meaning of Easter.

There are many ways that we could do this work of moving from an outward focus to an inner one. It could take the form of rejecting a bad habit that distracts from more important things or introducing a spiritual habit that brings your focus to spiritual things. At first these tasks might be relatively mundane, but as they build they can lead to real conflict and so also real growth. Let's say someone has the habit of making half-hearted commitments and not following through on promises. In the time leading up to Easter he decides his focus will be on rejecting this bad habit

and making sure he keeps his word even in small things. Now prior to making this change, he may have largely ignored the problem: it hardly hurt anyone and wasn't a big deal; besides, he could change anytime he wanted. But in making that commitment he starts out on the road to the underlying issues: resentment might build at his commitment; anger when keeping his word causes him great inconvenience; and the realization that actually there is a much deeper cause driven by love of self. Facing these deep-seated flaws forces a confrontation of real spiritual import.

Or maybe not: spiritual growth does not keep to our timeline. You can't predict that you'll start working on something small but meaningful now, and by Easter it will have grown to something much bigger or revealed the real spiritual work you needed to be doing. It may happen right away. Or it may happen in after months. But those opportunities will not arise if we don't embark on a journey of making room for spiritual change. It is preparatory work that the Lord, in His good time, can use to lead to a much more profound destination. The Teachings of the New Church compare it to a craftsman shaping a diamond:

In the precise degree in which man prepares his understanding by means of truths from the Word does he adapt his understanding to receive faith from God, and precisely as he prepares his will by means of works of charity does he fit his will for the reception of love from God, as when a workman cuts a diamond he fits it to receive and emit the glow of light; and so on. One prepares himself to receive God and to be conjoined with Him by living in accordance with the Divine order; and the laws of order are all the commandments of God. (*True Christian Religion* §110)

We prepare and adapt ourselves by keeping the Commandments of God. At times in mundane ways, and small ways, and seemingly insignificant ways; but it is the beginning of work that leads deeper and higher and to profound life.

This talk has focused on the beginnings and the preparation. But I want to at least end by mentioning the destination. As we know, for the Lord, He arrived in Jerusalem, He preached and confronted, and was crucified. And of course, He then arose in triumph. And when they found the empty tomb, an angel informed them where they would see Him again:

But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid Him. But go, tell His disciples—and Peter—that He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him, as He said to you." (Mark 16:6)

Jesus went before them back into Galilee; back to where they had come from; away from the antagonism of the great city and back home. Remember that Galilee stands for the more external parts of our lives. And indeed, after any powerful spiritual transformation, the Lord leads us back into every-day, ordinary life. With the difference that now the Lord goes before us and is with us.

As we prepare for Easter, we now are just starting the journey, putting in place those things that will lift our minds and hearts to the Lord. And ahead of us we still have the intense conflicts that will be stirred up by this journey. And indeed, we may fear even starting, afraid that it will upset our comfortable lives and wreck what we have built. But the final destination is not in conflict, nor even in glorious

overwhelming victory. The final destination is that having triumphed, we should return home, and find the peace we sought from the beginning, and yet which eluded us on a deeper level. So take the first steps, no matter how small, on that road to Jerusalem and back again.