

PASTORAL LETTER OF HIS BEATITUDE SVIATOSLAV TO YOUTH ON PALM SUNDAY

Beloved Youth in Christ—in Ukraine and abroad!



Palm Sunday, the Feast of our Lord's entry into Jerusalem, is the day when our Church with special attention embraces you in her thoughts and prayers. Our tradition of engaging with you in prayer is a most important experience, especially now, when, because of quarantine restrictions and social distancing, we must make an even greater effort to keep our connection vibrant and strong. COVID-19 has impacted all of us: the old and the young, families and communities—which is why the Church wishes to stand by every human being. However, we especially want to accompany young people, who are growing and being formed in this time of immense challenges and trials.

If you are 21 years old, you have spent a third of your life under the shadow of war in East Ukraine, and for the last year and a half you are experiencing a pandemic, which the world has not seen for a century. If we add political polarization, economic hardship found in many countries where our faithful have settled, and personal restlessness, which is typical for every young person, the result is—a twisted ball of knots, or even an explosive mixture.

And yet, the Good News of Christ reassures us that in the events which we remember today, in spite of the fact that they took place two thousand years ago, there are subtle answers to the challenges of today. What is it that we celebrate and experience anew this day?

After three years of preaching and teaching in different corners of Israel, after healings, miracles, and conflicts with teachers of the law, Jesus together with his disciples goes to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover there. This practice—to celebrate Passover in the city of the temple—was for the People of God of that time the spiritual event of the year!

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Whom do they greet? Christ’s entry into Jerusalem is called triumphant, regal. Various signs indicate this—palm branches, which in the ancient world was considered a symbol of victory; the ass, which for the Jews embodied the fulfillment of prophecies about the Messiah, who will come to liberate the people from enslavement; the crowd, that greets Christ with exclamations of “Hosanna!” and calls him a king.

In biblical understanding, the king of Israel is the one who creates and protects the fullness of life for his nation, and is the intermediary between God and His people. In other words, through the king God continuously creates, gives life to and cares for His people. At the time of the events of which we speak, there had not been a king for centuries—captivity evolved into enslavement, revolts suffered defeats, the people grew accustomed to ever new invaders, and began to cooperate with them in order to survive. But the Jews do not lose hope, they expect a warrior-king, who will liberate the people, will end Roman rule, will restore the glory of the past, and establish prosperity.

And what ultimately happens? The king does come, but He is different from what the Jews expected and what we imagine today. The one who comes is not an intermediate, but the Lord Himself, not a warrior, but God the Creator and Saviour, who willed to become a servant for His creation. He grants victory, but enslaves no one. In His camp there are no prisoners, and the prize is for all. He conquers not a land, city or throne, as Romans and the Jewish leadership feared, but the hearts of the people—He Himself wins them over, enthralls them with His example, moves them with His Word, calls them to follow Him!

Where is Christ going and calling others to follow? Jerusalem archeologists have reconstructed the Lord’s path through Jerusalem. They suggest that He entered the city through the south gate near the Pool of Siloam, a place known as “the lower city.” It was a gathering place for the outcasts, the poor, the sick and crippled, those deprived of a chance at life and even the possibility to climb up the temple hill and offer sacrifice, to celebrate along with others. He goes to the downtrodden, to the ones rejected by the people, in order to open up for them the fullness of life and health, and the gift of Passover. These people are precisely the first who—together with the enthralled and excited youth—greet Him as Saviour and Messiah.

The expression, “Hosanna, blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, the King of Israel!” in the language of today we might translate as “Blessed is the one, who gives me a chance, the possibility to rise up from the depths, where life has thrown me, to rediscover myself in this huge and foreign megapolis.” The divine power of Christ finds expression in His making the impossible possible for these people—healing those, whom the medicine of the day was unable to help, allowing those whom society and even the priestly order would denigrate and reject, to see themselves as worthy in God’s eyes, and, through the resurrection of Lazarus, demonstrate that He has the authority to bring back to life those, who lack the hope and strength to live.

Christ gives all a chance! A strange King is He! He does not take the lives of His opponents; to the contrary—He offers His own life. For the final destination of Christ’s triumphant entry into Jerusalem is Golgotha, and His throne—

the Cross. From there He reigns not only over Judea, as the Roman soldiers mockingly inscribed, but over the entire world, conquering not earthly enemies, but sin and death itself.

The King, whom we greet today with willow branches, collects nothing from us, but gives and returns to us everything. He grants and protects “the fullness of life” for all, He fulfills all dreams of the young person of today. He not only opens up the meaning of life, as a great teacher or prophet, but gives it in a way that only God can. Today, when our world trembles because of a pandemic that has made us hostages to fear, it is so important to remember this divine power and authority—to heal and grant life. The virus kills and cripples without mercy—it is likely that each one of us has friends, family members or acquaintances, who became its victims. In addition, it targeted the very heart of human relations—today in our human imagination another person represents not mystery and possibility, but danger and threat. The world of coronavirus has already changed our reflexes and customs. Humanity has lived under a regime of self-preservation for more than a year. Strangers are no longer able to exchange the occasional smile in public transport or supermarkets, and friends refrain from spontaneous hugs of support and fellowship. In protecting our elderly family members from the disease, we unintentionally increase the boundaries of their loneliness.

Let us not doubt that the world will be freed from the captivity of the pandemic. We, Christians, believe that rescue comes from God. However, He acts gently through the intellect, heart, and hands of others, granting them all the necessary means. Our neighbours not only represent danger, but also salvation. We think of the doctors, who selflessly fight for each life; of the volunteers, who purchase ventilators and oxygen concentrators; of benefactors, who assist with funds and materials; of those, who by following guidelines preserve humanity; of our neighbours and friends who, in spite of all the restrictions, support us with their kind thoughts, sincere prayer, daily service. The pandemic teaches us to not fear, and on the contrary—to understand that, in spite of our fragility, we are, in fact, strong.

At the same time, we do not fully comprehend how wounded we are because of the present experience, and how deep this global trauma may be. The coronavirus laid bare and sharpened the emotional and social problems of many people. We will take off our masks, but will we be able to trust others? Will not our automatic reflex be to shut off our homes and hearts to the pain of another, the moment a shadow of fear suggests that the other may be a threat? We don't have ready answers to these questions. Dear young people, it is together with you that the Church will search for them and seek to heal the wounds inflicted upon humankind by the pandemic and other challenges and problems, which the global disease has brought to the fore.

Humanity needs a Healer. Only He is capable of swooping us up, moving us, filling us with meaning, granting us the sense that we are capable of overcoming this tempest. The Lord silences the storm and at the same time teaches us to row.

“Fear not, daughter of Sion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!” (John 12:15; see Zech 9:9). Dear Ukrainian Youth, together with the entire world, you are going through so many difficulties! Possibly, because of the pandemic and quarantine, some of you have lost your job or part-time work as a student. Maybe you've been unable to enroll in the university you dreamed of joining or travelling to study abroad. Maybe you've been forced to completely change your plans and place your dreams on hold. Maybe you've suddenly lost family members and friends...

However, let us not fear. In this time of challenges our King, our Lord, is by our side, as He was with Mary and Martha when they mourned their brother Lazarus, or as He was with the rejected at the pool of Siloam. Where there is pain, fear, and hopelessness, He is there, to heal the wounds, restore hope, and create the fullness of life.

The Lord God is the kind of leader and guide who does not humiliate and conquer by force, but grants a sense of dignity and gives wings. And so, in seeking out earthly authority and teachers, give note to those, in whom there is something of Christ, who does not fear pain, but rather seeks to ease it, who does not rule, but serves, who calls others to follow by their personal example, and does not enslave. And you be the same. May the Lord in today's feast win over and touch our hearts, lead us to follow Him and grant us the strength to sing: “Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!” The blessing of the Lord be upon you!

† SVIATOSLAV

Given in Kyiv at the Patriarchal Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ, on the Day of the Our Holy Mother Matrona of Thessalonica, April 9 (March 27), 2021 A.D.