My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord of our Lenten Bodies, Hearts, Souls, and Spirits, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in Your sight, our strength and our Redeemer, Amen.

We see in today’s text reflections. Reflections of a gloried past, when Judas Maccabeus, a Hebrew Priest, led a revolt against the Greek Seleucid empire and won several key victories with his peasant army against a larger and better trained foe, particularly at the Battle of Emmaus (and where have we heard that place before?). In 164 BC the Temple was re-consecrated and purified to God, and Judas rode triumphantly into Jerusalem on, not a donkey as a royal priest might, but on a mighty horse as a victorious general might.

So no matter what beast Jesus really rode into Jerusalem on, I think the people saw something else, a savior on a horse of might and stature and it reminded them of long ago glories. Of Empire.

And yet it is not at all surprising that when Jesus had spent time in the countryside, rousing the peasants there to believe that he would deliver God’s Kingdom, that he would ride in on a donkey fulfilling what Zechariah had prophesied 400 years before saying that the savior would come on the back of a donkey. Look it up, Zechariah 9:1. But the people saw what they wanted to see.

A KING has come. And he wears a purple robe in other Gospels, just like Judas Maccabeus, Judas the HAMMER, is what that means. A HAMMER has come to do God’s will this Palm Sunday as Jesus rides into Jerusalem triumphantly among the crowds, and the authorities are nervous. The status quo is about to be turned upon its head, and they don’t like it one bit.

So we should ask ourselves do we see clearly or see what we want to see this Palm Sunday? Who has come into our lives? What kind of king do we receive and do we expect? Who is this Jesus who came in the wrong gate and not on a horse, doesn’t he understand Roman rules are not Biblical ones? What are we in for if we follow, or more importantly, don’t follow Jesus, the one who refuses expected and social convention? Who shall we follow to make our lives, the wealthy and privileged? Or the Christ who enters Jerusalem who sees the poor and disinherited first, so that we can raise generations who will love and serve God?

I read a book last summer called “The Altars Where We Worship: The Religious Significance of Pop Culture”, and it takes a not-so-tongue in cheek look at what it is we Americans pay attention to in living our lives. It’s written by two pastors who were also surprised with what they found. Mostly because these two got on an episode of ‘Wheel of Fortune’, and they were clapping and high-fiving and wanting to WIN thousands of dollars but wait…these were university professors…what would their colleagues say? Well, their colleagues didn’t harrumph them out of the academy, they held a watch party to egg them on and upon their return gave hints on how they could have done better and maybe won the jackpot. The point is even the authors of this book, just like yours truly who is guilty of watching too many episodes of the “Bachelorette”, give into Pop culture and the influence it exercises in America.

The authors begin to deconstruct the things that we pay attention to that make us want the world more than the Kingdom of God and all that it promises. It makes us ponder today whether we even saw Jesus go in the other gate, or are we too busy with these things to bother.

They take on bodies and sex, and remind us that we are obsessed with anti-aging and preservation of life in bodies that are wired to decay, and rather than aging gracefully we are frantically trying to extend our youthful looks and libido. Plastic surgeons define the shape of our bodies and what is…perfect? I’m glad I’m not a woman, because these two huge scars on my backside from my hip replacements would definitely (in the eyes of my surgeon) make me no longer swimsuit worthy. But at what point do I accept that my wife and my God love me anyway, despite my scars and inabilities, and my astonishing lack of table manners that have still given me a case of dropping everything I grasp with my right hand since my auto accident some years ago? Am I still attractive? Probably not according to most of the popular images I see in every form of media telling me younger, stronger, faster. But we still worship beauty, don’t we? Just not the beauty that God values in 1 Peter 3:4, “Rather, let your adornment be the inner self with the lasting beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in God’s sight.” American culture just doesn’t value much less worship beauty of the heart over the beauty of the skin. Or hair. Or what we wear.

The authors also take on business and careers. We admire a guy like Steve Jobs who created wonderful things with a company he founded that also chewed up the people who worked for it.

We worship Bill Gates who is the richest man on the planet most years but forget that he sank dozens of his competitors through illegal acts in the early days of the internet. Microsoft willingly paid fines as a cost of doing business while quashing the visions and dreams of many more entrepreneurs and wiping away their fortunes to build his own. But it’s OK now, right, with the Gates Foundation buying a malaria shot for every kid in Africa so that we can rid the world of that dread disease? Is it OK, where the results justify whatever the process was to get there? Do ends justify the means? We are still struggling with that debate when we see violation of labor laws overseas, making the shoes we love but paying workers poverty wages in unsafe working conditions.

They take on the entertainment and how the folks in charge of directing our movies only a few years ago were 93% white male, and you might remember a few years back how Chris Rock made fun of how all the people presenting the Oscars were diverse in race, sex, and ethnicity even as the nominees for the top actor awards were all white. Just like with the Black Lives Matter movement, the folks bringing attention to the inequality of our altar of happy endings and fantasies were dismissed by those who said not all things are racist or sexist. True, not all. But a helluva lot of them still are. We don’t want to know the truth, we want to escapist fantasy, not things as they are. As Jack Nicholson once quipped in a movie, we can’t handle the truth.

And the authors go through how we worship our political leaders expecting Bush or Obama or Trump or Biden to fix the world economic system or get Congress to actually do something for the people. We are constantly and justifiably disappointed in our expectations when the results do not materialize. But we’ve also raised our own country to a level of religious significance we never intended. WE know the righteous democracy to which all should aspire. WE know that this is the new Jerusalem, right? WE know that America is one nation UNDER GOD, and that by printing “In God We Trust” on our money or by saying “may God bless the United States of America” after every partisan speech that excludes the rights of so many who are not white and middle and upper income that God is surely on OUR side. But whose God? The Muslim, the Jew, the Hindu, the Mormon? Must it always imply the Christian flavor of religiosity? Who said that we have a corner on God’s heart, even on Palm Sunday? What would Jesus say to exclusivity if he heard what is being said today?

What King, then, and what altar, therefore, do we worship? Is it the humble king of the brokenhearted and the disinherited, the meek and the poor?

Or is it the King the one who graces the basketball court for the Lakers, or the one who first said we should lay offa his blue suede shoes or love him tender, or is it the one who said Billy Jean’s not his lover, or is it an actual King, of Spain, or of Tonga? Who do we worship? Last time I saw someone ride a donkey it was in the Shrek movie franchise. And even then we saw it was dirty, messy, and smelly when we actually see what it is, Shrek and Donkey, and not Prince Charming riding the white horse to the castle through the main gate to adoring crowds.

I’ll leave you with these thoughts.

If we were in Roman times, in the time of Jesus, there would be no question what King we might worship, because by the time Jesus arrived on the scene, Rome had Emperors, not just kings. And the Emperor was bigger than a King, because Emperors are fathered by Jupiter himself, and anyone that has Zeus as a Dad was therefore God also. And you certainly didn’t challenge that status…questioning a Roman God could get you killed.

Today, our realities are much murkier. For if we give our allegiance to Christ, we are giving UP all that we have in terms of our definition of this world. We will age. We will be poorer. We will not be captains of industry. We will not win statues or entertain thousands. We will not be Olympic stars.

But we will be remembered as faithful to God. And since when is that not enough? Give yourself and your Soul to the Lord, and watch what happens. You may be surprised, and you will certainly be in for the ride of your life.

And for that, Thanks be to God, Amen.