

Palm Sunday, Passion Sunday March 20, 2016

Isaiah 50, 4-7; Philippians 2, 6-11; Luke 22, 14 - 23, 56

Today the Church is celebrating the Palm Sunday which is also known as Passion Sunday to commemorate the beginning of Holy Week and Jesus' final agonizing journey to the cross. The word passion comes from a Latin word meaning "to suffer," and we meditatively go with the sufferings of Jesus. Here we have the rejoicing with the coming of Jesus and at the same time a reminder of his suffering that is to come in a short time. In the liturgical calendar Holy Week begins with the Sixth Sunday in Lent. Palm Sunday reminds the faithful of the glorious and triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. As Jesus entered into Jerusalem the crowds greeted him with shouts of joy and proclaimed him as the messianic king. They spread their cloaks on the ground and placed the palm branches on the street and shouted "Hosanna to the Son of David" and "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord". The Gospels tell us that Jesus rode into the city on a donkey, as foretold by Prophet Zechariah, and in so doing emphasized the humility that was to characterize the Kingdom he proclaimed. In biblical times, the regional custom called for kings and nobles arriving in procession to ride on the back of a donkey. The donkey was a symbol of peace and those who rode upon them proclaimed peaceful intentions. The laying of palm branches indicated that the king or dignitary was arriving in victory or triumph.

Today's readings present us the glorious triumph of a king and this is combined with his sufferings. The Gospel during the procession tells us of his victory and the latter reading reveals in painful detail the physical sufferings of Jesus. There is the rejection, pain, misunderstanding and humiliations. And yet through it all Jesus stands firm, faithful to God till the end. In the process there is a transformation. The leader becomes a servant; shame turns to honour; mockery becomes praise; fear turns to trust; abandonment becomes love; despair turns into hope; and above all death blossoms into new life. This is again confirmed in the first reading where the servant is faithful to God. He suffers in silence and accepts all accusations mockery and pain. Yet he remains faithful to God. The second reading tells us of the exaltation of Jesus because he obeyed and submitted to death even the shameful death on the cross. Thus the readings of today tell us that young or old, as followers of Jesus we must take risks. Loving others especially the ones we do not like is difficult. Giving of ourselves when we have nothing left to give requires great strength. Having faith when everything points to doubt is struggle. To feel hopeful when all seems lost needs energy. Yet in this faith, hope and love we discover countless blessing of the divine.

In the first reading of today the faithful servant receives a mission from the Lord. This figure is totally dedicated to the will of God and provides welcome relief from the self-willed and faithless kings of the time. The servant's identity is debated and yet we have him as one faithful to God. The servant is attentive to God's word at the start of each day. He is unlike the children of Israel who refused to listen to God. The prophet had to remind them constantly about their infidelity and their inability to listen to the message of God. The servant is thrilled to serve God and serve as his instrument privileged to speak his word. The Servant is proud too as he has the God given gift of tongue to proclaim the good news. But the Servant suffers in a world that resists the divine message. Many will reject him and torture him but he knows that God is always on his side. The hardships the Servant endures include ridicule, contempt, and even physical abuse. But none of these distracts the Servant from proclaiming the Word of God. The servant serves the court of heaven and nothing can stop him from doing this loyal task. His face is set on the Lord and he will listen to him all the time.

In the second reading we have the Pauline hymn of Incarnation. This reflects the faith of the early church in the true humanity and true divinity of Christ. He, who was God, humbled himself to become man like us, hiding his divine glory but receiving it back at his glorification or his resurrection. The purpose of this is not to expound the logistics of the incarnation, but it was to serve as an example to the church at Philippi of true humility, and to look to the needs of one another. The hymn tells us that even though he was divine, he took willingly the human form for our sake. Secondly he is the new Adam who became obedient and he did not cling to his divinity. Thirdly, he is the servant of God who accepted sufferings for the sake of humanity. Finally he died on the cross a death of shame and humiliation. That death became the sign of triumph and glory and the means of salvation of the world. The cross became the symbol of glory. Because of this everyone must confess and adore his equality in divine glory with his Father.

According to the Gospels, before entering Jerusalem, Jesus was staying at Bethany and Bethpage, and the Gospel of John adds that he had dinner with Lazarus, and his sisters Mary and Martha. While there, he sends two disciples to the village over against them, in order to retrieve a donkey that had been tied up but never been ridden, and to say, if questioned, that the donkey was needed by the Lord but would be returned. Jesus then rode the donkey into Jerusalem, with the disciples first putting their cloaks on it, so as to make it more comfortable. The Gospels go on to recount how Jesus rode into Jerusalem, and how the people there lay down

their cloaks in front of him, and also lay down small branches of trees. The people sang part of Psalm to give him a welcome befitting the messianic king.

In the present day celebration, worshippers enact the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem by the waving of palm branches and singing songs of celebration. Sometimes this is accompanied by a procession into the church. The liturgical colour for the Season of Lent is purple but in Catholic tradition the colours are changed to Red for Palm Sunday. Red is the colour of the church, used for Pentecost as well as remembering the martyrs of the church. Since it symbolizes shedding of blood, it is also used on Palm Sunday to symbolize the death of Jesus. Increasingly, many churches are incorporating an emphasis on the Passion of Jesus into services on Palm Sunday as a way to balance the celebration of Easter Sunday. This provides an opportunity for people who do not or cannot attend a Good Friday Service to experience the contrast of Jesus' death and the Resurrection, rather than celebrating the Resurrection in isolation from Jesus' suffering.

The liturgy of the day contains first the blessing of the palms. This is included as a part of the Eucharistic celebration. As we go for the celebration of the holy Eucharist, we recollect and honour Jesus' entering the great city of Jerusalem. The Church maintains the dignity of the celebrations and turns to the blessing of the palms. The prayers she uses for this blessing are eloquent and full of instruction and, together with the sprinkling with holy water and the incense, impart a virtue to these branches which elevates them to the supernatural order. The faithful should hold these palms in their hands during the procession, and during the reading of the Passion at Mass, and keep them in their homes as an outward expression of their faith. It is probable that, as far as Jerusalem itself was concerned, the celebration of Palm Sunday began immediately after the ages of persecution. It was a form of public worship by the Christians as against the quiet celebration of the Eucharist. St. Cyril, who was bishop of that city in the fourth century, tells us that the palm tree, from which the people cut the branches when they went out to meet our Saviour, was still to be seen in the valley of Cedron. The ceremony consisted of prayers, hymns, and sermons recited by the clergy while the people moved among various holy sites throughout the city. In the simplest of terms, Palm Sunday is an occasion for reflecting on the final week of Jesus' life.

The coming of the Lord to the city of Jerusalem is not something sad! It is the joy that is in all hearts, for the triumph of the Head, he who is the first among his brothers, necessarily reflects back upon all who are united to him and who, in him, are also sons of God, not by nature, but by adoption. When Christ is acclaimed and praised, the entire Church is glorified in him, for the Head and the Body are inseparable, a single and unique Mystery: that of the grace of God poured out upon

the whole world for the salvation of all men! Each day, every time we participate in the Eucharist, we repeat these same words: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" After the preface, and before the Eucharistic Prayer, each time the Church celebrates the Eucharistic sacrifice, these words resound in the temple of God and call He who is about to come into his Church under the appearance of a little bread and wine, in this way preparing for his ultimate coming in unequalled glory! Let us think of this each time! Let us unite our heart and soul to all those who acclaimed Jesus on the road to Jerusalem on that day!

The Gospel of today gives us the passion narratives. The passion narrative has long been recognised as the most significant portion of the four Gospels. The reason is that the very core of Christian faith is expressed in these chapters: namely the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. Each of the Gospel writers presents his own unique theological perspective and yet the basic outline in all four is the same. In today's passion narrative, Luke builds up five basic events that take place during the last few days of the earthly life of Jesus. First is that Jesus shares his final meal with the disciples. Second, Jesus is arrested by his enemies. Third, Jesus is subjected to the so called Jewish trial. Fourth, Jesus is subjected to the Roman trial and is condemned to death. Fifth, Jesus is crucified on the cross. He dies on the cross and is buried soon after. Yet the movement towards death begins when Jesus commences his long journey to Jerusalem as told by Luke in Chapter nine. He tells us that Jesus resolutely determined to journey to Jerusalem. Jerusalem was his destiny and the place of glorification through his cross.

In this passion narrative we see the unfathomable love of God for us human persons shown in his beloved son Jesus. When we see the crucifix we see the Son of God nailed hands and feet to that cross, slowly shedding his blood for us. The Pharisees and the people mocked him at Calvary as he hung crucified. Pilate condemned an innocent person to death. He had to die a humiliating death hung between two thieves. The leaders deliberately put him with the criminals to humiliate him further before the people and to have them associate him with robbers. The helplessness of the God-man was visible on the cross. In the face of those insults, and the people watching, and the leaders sneering, and the soldiers offering sour wine, Jesus had things to say. He did not say them only once. He went on repeating them. His words, "Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing" hold for all time, for we too are included in it. God's merciful answer to his dying son Jesus is for us too since we are his chosen ones. In his last words to anyone on earth Jesus kept assuring the penitent thief that that very day they would be together in paradise.

The Gospel tells us that as his death approached, there was darkness over the whole land. The powers of darkness were now approaching their moment of triumph. At that moment Jesus commends his soul to the Father. Into your hand I commend my spirit was the prayer of Jesus taken from the psalm 31, taught by every Jewish mother to their children before the night prayer. Here Jesus uses the word Father to make it an affectionate conclusion. The crowd seeing this was softened and women were touched. Jesus had triumphed. Into that scene comes a final good human being, Joseph of Arimathea, a good man and a secret disciple of Jesus and Mark says that he was a distinguished and bold person. He is now courageous and bold and gets the body of Jesus from Pilot and even lends his own tomb. Luke says he is an upright and holy man. Even in that hate filled assembly there was at least one voice speaking for Jesus. Perhaps this is a great lesson for us to take courage to speak for him. May our reflections on the sufferings and death of Jesus make us true participants in the events and just spectators in the life episode of Jesus.

The liturgy of Palm Sunday, in the past two decades has been closely related to the celebration of the Youth Day. Pope Benedict XVI in his homily of 2006 Palm Sunday said that for 20 years, thanks to Pope John Paul II, Palm Sunday has become in a particular way the Day of Youth, the day that young people around the world go out to meet Christ, wishing to accompany him in their cities and countries so that he will be among us and be able to establish his peace in the world. The Pope stressed the three characteristics proclaimed by the church, poverty, peace, universality -- are summarized in the sign of the cross. Palm Sunday, however, tells us that the authentic great "yes" is, in fact, the cross, that the cross is the authentic tree of life.

One day, a man was walking along the shore. As he looked down the beach, he saw a young person reaching down to the sand, picking up something and very gently throwing it back into the sea. As he got closer, he called out, "Good morning! What are you doing?" The young person paused, looked up and replied, "Throwing starfish into the sea." "Why are you throwing starfish into the sea?" he asked. "The sun is up and the tide is going out. If I don't throw them in they'll die." "But, don't you realize that there are miles of beach here and starfish all along it. You can't possibly make a difference!" The young person listened politely. Then knelt down, picked up another starfish and threw it into the sea, past the breaking waves and said..."Made a difference to this one."

In a small town a teacher gave a small exercise to the students of her class. They were to go to the street corners and search for a flower that was lonely in the sense

no one had noticed it at any time, study its various characteristics and beauty, count the petals it had and write a report. The students did just that and there was a new thrill in their search. They all came back experiencing something new they had not seen or ignored so far. They narrated the details and then the teacher explained what it meant for the flower so far left alone and un-noticed. Same thing takes place with human persons in the world. They are lonely and like the lonely flower left alone not noticed by any one. They need to search and look and see in each person his or her characters, beauty and freshness. That will make them happy and cheerful.

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