

Passion Palm Sunday April 09, 2017

Readings: Isaiah 50:4-7; Philippians 2:6-11; Matthew 26:14-27:66

Today we celebrate the Palm Sunday or the Passion Sunday. Palm Sunday commemorates the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. The gospels record the arrival of Jesus riding into the city on a donkey, while the crowds spread their cloaks and palm branches on the street and shout "Hosanna to the Son of David" and "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" and they honor him as their long-awaited Messiah and King. The significance of Jesus riding a donkey and having his way paved with palm branches is a fulfillment of a prophecy spoken by the 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; 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. As Jesus began His exuberant entrance into Jerusalem, many people gathered on the road and spread their clothes in front of him and shout Hosanna. The church today holds a similar procession to remember the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem and also to remind people of the beginning of the Passion of our Lord. The simplest of terms, Palm Sunday is an occasion for reflecting on the final week of Jesus' life. It is a time for Christians to prepare their hearts for the agony of His Passion and death while awaiting the joy of His Resurrection.

According to the Gospels, before entering Jerusalem, Jesus was staying at Bethany and Bethpage with Lazarus, and his sisters Mary and Martha. While there, he sends two disciples to the village 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 master. Jesus then rode the donkey into Jerusalem, with the disciples to receive a welcome befitting the messianic king. The First Reading from the Gospel of Matthew provides us with the account of the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. This event was in fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah who said, "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." Indeed, during the last week of His ministry on earth, Jesus was recognized as the promised Messiah and proclaimed

as King by many of the Jewish people who had known Him and who seen the power of God manifested through Him.

Today with the beginning of the Holy week, we focus intently on the heart of the mystery of Salvation. It is the mystery of dying and rising, the mystery of humiliation and exaltation. Today's liturgy prepares us specially for the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. The Liturgy gives the picture of Joy and at the same time invites us to meditate on his sufferings. What Jesus experiences for us is a manifestation of God's overwhelming love for each one of us. Further, by our identifying ourselves with the 'mystery' of Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection we ourselves experience a great liberation, a 'Passover' from various forms of sin and enslavement to a life of joy and freedom. Hence today's liturgy combines both a sense of triumph and tragedy. Very importantly, we are reminded at the beginning, that we are about to commemorate the triumph of Christ our King. We do this through the blessing of palms, the procession and the joyful singing. And the celebrant wears red vestments. We need to keep this in mind as we proceed in the second half to hear the long tale of the sufferings and indignities to which Jesus was subjected. Very soon it will be difficult to recognize our King in the battered, scourged, crowned-with-thorns, crucified remnant of a human being.

The Liturgy of the day contains first the blessing of the palms, a rite that has come from the past. This is included as a part of the Eucharistic celebration. 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 the sacramental in their homes as an outward expression of their faith.

The Blessing of Palms and procession has come down from the early days of the church. 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. At the last site, where Christ ascended into heaven, the clergy would read from the gospels concerning the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. In the early evening they would return to the city reciting: "Blessed is He that comes in the name of the Lord." The children would carry palm and olive branches as the people returned through the city to the church, where they would hold evening services. By the fifth century, the Palm Sunday celebration had spread as far as Constantinople and by eighth century to the Western Church. The Roman Missal marks the station at St. John Lateran and before September 1870, the pope performed the ceremonies there. The ceremonies became simplified in order to focus more on the death and suffering of Jesus and thus the name Passion Sunday.

Today's Second Reading from the Book of Isaiah prophesied that the Chosen Servant, the Messiah, would freely accept His sufferings and death so He would not be put to shame. Here the prophet meditates on his sufferings and the price of fidelity to God. The servant is specially chosen to proclaim the divine message which would rouse their hearts to God. For the sake of the word of God the Servant has to suffer. He says that he gave his back to those who beat him and he did not hesitate to receive any insult for his sake. The prophet then shows the hope and confidence of the chosen servant. He says that the Lord is his help and therefore in spite of the sufferings he is not disgraced. He knows that he specially loved by God and will not be put to shame.

The Third Reading confirmed this, that Jesus humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. In this reading Paul reminds us to have the same mind as that of Christ Jesus. We are called to imitate Jesus, His humility and abasement as a model of conduct that should be found in the faith community. Though he was in the form of God, Jesus having enjoyed Divine pre-existence, He did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited. In His Divine incarnation, He humbled Himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. Jesus did not empty Himself of His Divinity but He voluntarily gave up the Divine glory to which He was entitled, a glory that would be restored at His exaltation. It is God who exalted him to the highest of places and on earth there is the religious adoration at the name of Jesus, that

every knee should bend, in Heaven and on earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The Gospel of today taken from Matthew that gives us an account of the Passion of the Lord, from the Last Supper up to his death on the cross and burial in a borrowed tomb. The narrative places before us various events that took place and the sufferings he endured. We have the institution of the Eucharist, where he shares himself with his disciples and tells them to do in his memory. We heard of the betrayal of Judas, of Jesus loving him till the last moment, the foretelling of Peter's denial, the praying of Jesus in Gethsemane and of His arrest. Then there was the appearance of Jesus before the high priest, Peter's denial, Jesus before Pilate, the death of Judas, Pilate questioning Jesus about his teaching and his kingship. The people were given a choice between Barabbas and Jesus and we heard how a criminal being preferred for a just man. Pilate finally hands over Jesus to be crucified. The soldiers then took him beat him as the routine was and spend time mocking Jesus. There is the cruel way of the cross where Jesus carrying his cross goes through all public places to be mocked and insulted. He was helpless and no one could come close to him or help him. His own disciples had left him and run away. Finally he was crucified on Golgotha, nailed and hung on the cross between two thieves. He was insulted by all people, by those who crucified him and by those who were crucified with him. Finally he died on the cross and was laid in a borrowed tomb.

Today's readings tell us that Jesus suffered as a human person and he underwent pain that we associate with the more barbaric forms of torture in our own day. But he must also have suffered psychologically and this pain may have been even more intense. It seemed as if his entire mission collapsed all around him and all looked like a failure. His disciples had all left him alone to suffer and ran away as soon as he was arrested. During this time of sufferings he experienced terrible loneliness. His disciples fell asleep in the garden when he needed their support. They ran off as soon as people came to arrest Jesus. Even the Father seemed to be silent and apparently did nothing to reduce his pain. There is the final poignant cry from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Yet through it all Jesus' the dignity, power and authority kept onshining, making his captors and enemies to be the ones on the defensive. After the prayer in the garden, when Jesus stands up facing those arresting him, we see his inner strength and authority. He stands in silent dignity before his judges, refusing to

be intimidated. In the midst of his own pain and indignities, he can continue to think of the needs of others and can, after his own teaching, pray for and forgive his enemies. Yet he completes his task on the cross to say it is accomplished and he is fulfilled his Father's will and his mission.

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. If we want to go out to encounter Jesus and then walk with him on his way to discover what he means to us today. Pope Benedict XVI, while speaking to the Youth in Rome on Palm Sunday 2007, said: "In the Palm Sunday procession we join with the crowd of disciples who in festive joy accompany the Lord during his entry into Jerusalem. Like them, we praise the Lord with a loud voice for all the miracles we have seen, how he gives men and women the courage to oppose violence and deceit, to make room for truth in the world; to bring about reconciliation where there had been hatred and to create peace where enmity had reigned. The Pope then stressed the three characteristics proclaimed by the church, poverty, peace, universality -- are summarized in the sign of the cross. Because of this, and rightly so, the cross has become the centre of World Youth Day.

Today, when we contemplate on Palm Sunday we see the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem which led immediately to his suffering and death. The people who shouted Hosannas for him and called him a Messiah, soon would shout Crucify him and choose a criminal in place of the just man. In the simplest of terms, Palm Sunday is an occasion for reflecting on the final week of Jesus' life. It is a time for Christians to prepare their hearts for the agony of His Passion and the joy of His Resurrection. It will lead us to mystery of the Last Supper, the Priesthood of Jesus, his majesty in suffering and his ultimate victory. He was obedient to his Father and he accepted his will to suffer and die to save all. It was his unconditional love for God and man that led him to accept this pain. Let us solemnly walk to Jesus and prepare ourselves for the glory of his Resurrection.

Some years ago, on a hot summer day in south Florida, a little boy decided to go for a swim in the old swimming hole behind his house. He flew into the water, not realizing that as he swam toward the middle of the lake, an alligator was swimming toward the shore. His father, working in the yard, saw the two as they got closer and closer together. In utter fear, he ran toward the water, yelling to his son as loudly as he could. Hearing his voice, the little boy became alarmed and made a U-turn to swim to his father. It was too late. Just as he reached his father, the alligator reached him. From the dock, the father grabbed his little boy by the arms just as the alligator snatched his legs. That began an incredible tug-of-war between the two. The alligator was much stronger than the father, but the father was much too passionate to let go. A farmer happened to drive by, heard his screams, raced from his truck, took aim and shot the alligator. Remarkably, after weeks and weeks in the hospital, the little boy survived. His legs were extremely scarred by the vicious attack of the animal. And, on his arms, were deep scratches where his father's fingernails dug into his flesh in his effort to hang on to the son he loved. The newspaper reporter, who interviewed the boy after the trauma, asked if he would show him his scars. The boy lifted his pant legs. And then, with obvious pride, he said to the reporter, "But look at my arms. I have great scars on my arms, too. I have them because my Dad wouldn't let go"

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