

Sixth Sunday of Lent Passion Sunday (Palm Sunday) March 25, 2018

Isaiah 50:4-7; Phil 2:6-11; Mark 14:1-15:47

With the celebration of the Palm Sunday or the Passion Sunday we enter into the Holy Week. Passion Sunday is a day to reflect on the pain, suffering and death of our Lord Jesus. The day begins with the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem as King. He is entering with majesty into the Temple city to celebrate the Passover. The gospels record his arrival riding 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." There is the manifestation of joy and enthusiastic welcome from the crowds as Jesus enters Jerusalem. They honour him as their long-awaited Messiah and King who has come victorious. The significance of Jesus riding a donkey and having his way paved with palm branches is a fulfilment of a prophecy spoken by the prophet Zechariah and in so doing emphasized the humility that was to characterize the Kingdom he proclaimed. In those days the regional custom called for kings and nobles to arrive in procession riding 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 arriving in victory or triumph. Just as the people gathered on the road and spread their clothes and went in procession so also the church today holds a procession to remember the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. The simplest of terms, Palm Sunday is an occasion to reflect on the final week of Jesus' life. It is a time for Christians to prepare their hearts for the mystery of salvation.

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. The earliest evidence of Palm Sunday events can be traced back to Jerusalem in the 4th century and in the following century, we find this ceremony established, not only in the churches of the East, but also in the monasteries of Egypt and Syria. 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. At the beginning of Lent, many of the holy monks obtained permission from their abbots to retire into the desert, that they might spend the sacred season in strict seclusion; but they were obliged to return to their monasteries for Palm Sunday. 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 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. The Roman Missal marks the station at St. John Lateran and before September 1870, the pope performed the ceremonies there. Later the ceremonies became simplified in order to focus more on the death and suffering of Jesus and thus the name Passion Sunday.

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 Gospel is read reminding the people of the solemn entry of Jesus into Jerusalem and the way people welcomed him. Just like the Jews and disciples greeted him with palms in hand the church also welcome Jesus as he enters into his passion. The faithful 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. With this we begin the Holy week and 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.

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 Gospel of Matthew provides us with the account of the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. This event was in fulfilment 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 final 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.

Prophet Isaiah in today's Second Reading prophesied that the Chosen Servant, the Messiah, would freely accept his sufferings and death therefore he would not be put to shame. Here the prophet meditates on his sufferings and the price he pays for his 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 had to suffer. He silently accepted the sufferings unjustly placed on to him. He says that he gave his back to those who beat him and he did not hesitate to receive any insult for his sake. He was aware that he was chosen by God on a mission. The prophet then showed the hope and confidence of the chosen servant. He hoped for sure that the Lord was his help and therefore in spite of the sufferings he was not disgraced. He was under his care and protection. He knew that he was specially loved by God and would not be put to shame.

Our key to understanding this week is in today's Second Reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians that we must be of the same mind as of Christ Jesus. Though Jesus was in the form of God, he emptied himself, and went down to the lowest depths of degradation and humiliation, dying naked and as a convicted criminal. This is the measure of his love for us, laying down his life for his friends, his chosen ones. Now because of the intensity of the love he showed he is swept up into the glory of God. Like Jesus we also have to be ready to empty ourselves in love for him and to be totally at the service of our brothers and sisters. 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, 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 which 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 Passion reading today consists of two whole chapters from the Gospel of Mark. It describes the agony, suffering and death of Jesus. It tells us of the quiet planning of enemies to destroy him while a sinful woman anoints his feet with precious perfume which Judas considers a waste. He now plans to betray Jesus in exchange for money. During the Passover meal, the Lord's Supper Jesus shared his own body and blood symbolically and invited his disciples to

do the same in his memory. At the same time he told them that he was aware of the plot against him. He even predicted the three fold denial of Peter. In the Garden of Gethsemane we have the example of the prayer of Jesus. It is a prayer of petition asking the Father to take the chalice away from him but ends with the acceptance of the will of the Father. During this time of trial he was unable to get any support from his own friends. They were sleeping when he needed them the most. He saw the distortion of love when he was betrayed with a kiss.

After his arrest there was the mock trial of Jesus where they insulted and humiliated him. They brought false witnesses showing their ultimate aim to kill him and destroy his very presence. He had been a threat to them. They brought him to Pilate to be sentenced to death and that too death on a cross. Pilate saw his innocence and even though he desired, was unable to release him. Finally Pilate condemned him to be crucified. He was flogged as the custom was and they mocked him a king. The soldiers beat him and made a crown of thorns to be placed on his head, the symbol of a king. Jesus was made to carry his cross to Calvary. His was the painful journey to pass through the city where he preached and worked miracles. They compelled a passer-by, Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus to carry his cross. Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha which means the place of a skull. There they offered him wine mixed with myrrh. He tasted it but he did not drink. He was crucified and was left hanging between two thieves. The soldiers divided his clothes among them, casting lots to decide what each should take. He was helpless and no one could come close to him. His own disciples had left him and had run away. He was insulted by all people, by those who crucified him and by those who were crucified with him. This was his moment of prayer, his closeness to his Father. Having accomplished his work Jesus placed his soul in the hands of his Father. His beloved mother and a few persons who loved him remained close to him. His friends Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea organized his burial. The centurion made the final revelation saying he was a great man, the son of God.

Today's liturgy while presenting a picture of triumph, prepares us especially for the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. What Jesus experienced 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 of the triumph of Christ our King. We do this through the blessing of palms, the procession and the joyful singing. The celebrant wears red vestments, the sign of a king. However, 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 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, then we must walk with him on his way, to discover what he means to us today. 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 our Christian belief.

Today's Passion narrative tells us that Jesus suffered as a human person and he underwent pain we associate with the barbaric forms of torture in our own day. The passion narratives tell us of the torture Jesus went through due to human cruelty by inflicting on him the pain a human person could invent. At the same time he also 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 a failure. His disciples had all left him and ran away soon after his arrest. During his sufferings he experienced acute loneliness. His disciples fell asleep at Gethsemane when he needed their support. They ran away as soon as he was arrested. 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 on shining, making his captors and enemies to be the ones on the defensive. After the prayer in the garden Jesus stands before his enemies with strength and authority. He stands in silent dignity before his judges, refusing to be intimidated. In the midst of his own pain and sufferings he could think of the needs of others and 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.

During Thomas Jefferson's presidency he and a group of travellers were crossing a river that had overflowed its banks. Each man crossed on horseback fighting for his life. A lone traveller watched the group traverse the treacherous river and then asked President Jefferson to take him across. The president agreed without hesitation, the man climbed on, and the two made it safely to the other side of the river where somebody asked him: "Why did you select the President to ask this favour?" The man was shocked, admitting he had no idea it was the President of the United States who had carried him safely across. "All I know," he said, "is that on some of your faces was written the answer 'No' and on some of them was the answer 'Yes.' His was a 'Yes' face."

Fr Eugene Lobo S.J., Bangalore, India