

Homily of Palm Sunday Year A, 2023

Matthew 21: 1-11; Isaiah 50:4-7; Psalm 22:8-9, 17-20, 23-24; Philippians 2:6-11; Matthew 26:14-27:66

Today, Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord, is the sixth and last Sunday of Lent. It commemorates the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, days before he was crucified. Palm Sunday marks the beginning of the Holy Week. The gospel's Passion narrative invites us to participate in the mystery of Jesus' Passion journey.

Almost all Jewish prophets prophesied the coming of the messiah who would redeem Israel from her oppressors. At the time of Jesus, Israel was governed by the Romans. Jesus' disciples were convinced that Jesus was a political messiah who would lead a rebellion against the Roman colonial rule and drive out the Romans. Therefore, on arriving in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, he was given a rousing and heroic welcome: "The very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and strewed them on the road. The crowds preceding him and those following kept crying out and saying: 'Hosanna to the Son of David; blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord; hosanna in the highest'" (Matthew 21:8-9). In Hebrew, 'hosanna' means, 'save us now.' So, the people were crying, "Save us now, Son of David; you are sent by the Lord, it's high time you save us." Like the crowds, we cry to Jesus to save us from our afflictions.

John 12:13 writes, "They took palm branches and went out to meet him and cried out." It is from this line that this Sunday is named "Palm Sunday." At the time of Jesus, for the Jewish people, palm branches were considered symbols of victory and triumph. Unknowingly, the crowds proclaimed Jesus as the savior of the world who was to triumph and become victorious over death.

I do not think that the crowds would have cried to Jesus to save them if they knew that he was not a political messiah. A few days later, the crowds shouted, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Could it be that the crowds were frustrated and disappointed that Jesus did not fulfill their expectation? If Jesus had overthrown the Roman leadership, the crowds would have stood behind him. He would not have been crucified. Do we do as the Jews and the crowds did? We get very disappointed, frustrated, and upset when our expectations are not met. Then, we become aggressive and destructive.

As we read in the gospel, Jesus entered Jerusalem riding a colt (a young donkey). Jesus chose to enter Jerusalem on a donkey, which was, at that time, the means of transportation for the poor; instead of a horse, which was the means of transportation for the rich, the high and the mighty. By riding a donkey, a beast of burden, Jesus made himself our 'beast of burden' thereby fulfilling Isaiah 53:54, "He took up our pain and bore our suffering." Like the donkey, Jesus carries our pains and sufferings.

By riding a donkey, Jesus identified himself with the poor and the lowly, and he teaches us to do the same. He wants us to identify with the burdened, the needy, the sick, and the suffering. And by riding a donkey, Jesus teaches us the importance of detachment and humility. In Matthew 11:29, Jesus says, "Learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart."

A blessed palm leaf is not to be thrown around or discarded as trash. It is kept reverently until next year when it is returned to the church to be burned for our use on Ash Wednesday.

Today's celebration becomes even more meaningful if Jesus makes a triumphal entry into our lives, grant us peace, victory over evil, salvation, and eternal life. Let us not stop Jesus' entry into our lives by our sins. Jesus says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, then I will enter his house and dine with him, and he with me" (Revelations 3:20).

In some cultures, in times of crisis or misunderstanding, carrying, or presenting of palm leaves is a gesture of peace and reconciliation. Today, the Church gives us palm leaves, a symbol of peace and reconciliation, to take to our homes and places. Let us share the message of peace and reconciliation with one another. You may take a leaf to someone as a gesture of peace and reconciliation.

Lastly, St. Andrew of Crete writes, "Let us imitate those who have gone out to meet him, not scattering olive branches or garments or palms in his path, but spreading ourselves before him as best as we can with humility of soul and upright purpose ... It is ourselves that we must spread under Christ's feet..."

Let us sing:

*Father, we adore you, lay our lives before you, how we love you.
Jesus, we adore you, lay our lives before you, how we love you.
Spirit, we adore you, lay our lives before you, how we love you.*

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