

Homily of Palm Sunday, Year B, 2024

Mark 11:1-10; Isaiah 50:4-7; Psalm 22:8-9, 17-20, 23-24; Philippians 2:6-11; Mark 1-15:47

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. "Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut from the fields. Those preceding him as well as those following kept crying out: 'Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is to come! Hosanna in the highest!'" (Mark 11:8-10). One of the meanings of the Hebrew word 'hosanna' is 'save.' The people cried to Jesus to save them from their colonial masters. We are doing the same. We are crying to Jesus to save us from our afflictions and whatever that has 'colonized' us physically and spiritually.

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 as 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 people would have cried to Jesus to save them if they knew that he was not a political messiah. A few days later, the people shouted, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Could it be that the people were frustrated and disappointed that Jesus did not fulfill their expectation? If Jesus had led a successful rebellion against the Romans, would the people have cried "Crucify him! Crucify him!?" I do not think so. Do we do like those people? 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 makes himself our 'beast of burden' thereby fulfilling Isaiah 53:4, "He took up our pain and bore our suffering." Like the donkey, Jesus carries our pains and sufferings.

By riding a donkey, Jesus identifies 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. 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."

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..."

In some cultures, in times of crisis or misunderstanding, carrying palm leaves or presenting 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 palm leaf from this Mass to someone as a gesture of peace and reconciliation.

Today's celebration becomes even more meaningful if Jesus makes a triumphal entry into our lives and grants us peace and victory over evil. 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).

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