

Homily of Palm Sunday Year C

Palm Sunday, also referred to as Passion Sunday, is the sixth and last Sunday of Lent. It marks the beginning of Holy Week. Palm Sunday commemorates the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, days before he was crucified.

Almost all Jewish prophets had prophesied the coming of the messiah who was to redeem Israel from their 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. On arriving in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, he was given a rousing and heroic welcome: "As he rode along, many people were spreading their cloaks on the road; and now as he was approaching the slope of Mount Olives, the multitude of his disciples began to praise God aloud with joy for all the mighty deeds they had seen. They proclaimed: Blessed is the kind who comes in the name of the Lord. Peace in heaven and glory in the highest." I don't think that the people would have given Jesus the rousing and heroic welcome if they knew he was not a political messiah. A few days later, the same crowd shouted, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" I guess that the people were frustrated and disappointed that Jesus did not fulfill their expectation.

There are some lessons we can learn from today's celebration.

As we read in the Gospel, Jesus entered Jerusalem riding a colt (a young donkey). Jesus chose to enter into Jerusalem on a donkey instead of a horse. He identified himself with a donkey which is a 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.

At that time, horse was the means of transportation for the rich, the high and the mighty, while donkey was the means of transportation for the poor. By riding on a donkey, Jesus identified himself with the poor and the lowly. Jesus teaches us to do the same. He wants us to identify with those who are burdened: needy, the sick and the suffering. By riding on 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."

The palm leaves we carry and bless today is a reenactment of the event of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. "So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying 'Hosanna...'" (John 12:12-13). It is interesting to know that in some cultures, in times of crisis or misunderstanding, carrying or presenting of palm leaves is a symbol or a gesture of peace. It means an invitation to peace and reconciliation. Therefore, the palm leaves we carry today is also celebrating Jesus as the King of Peace. Blessed palm 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 and the ash is put on our forehead on Ash Wednesday.

Today's celebration becomes even more meaningful if Jesus makes a triumphal entry into our lives. Let not such entry be short lived, or end up in him being crucified again due to our sins. The Lord 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).

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..."