

Homily of Palm Sunday, Year B

Palm Sunday is the sixth and last Sunday of Lent, and it marks the beginning of Holy Week. Palm Sunday commemorates the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, days before he was crucified.

As we read in the Gospel, Jesus entered Jerusalem riding a colt (a young donkey). His disciples and others who had longed for political freedom thought that Jesus was a political messiah and was about to lead a rebellion against the Roman colonial rule, gave him 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!'" I don't think that the people would have given Jesus this type of rousing and heroic welcome if they had seen Jesus as a spiritual messiah.

A few days later, the same crowd shouted, "Crucify him." "Crucify him." I have no doubt that the people were frustrated and disappointed by Jesus not leading the rebellion they expected of him.

What lessons do we learn from today's celebration?

Jesus chose to enter into Jerusalem on a donkey instead of a horse. At that time, horse was the means of transportation for the rich while donkey was the means of transportation for the poor. By using a donkey, Jesus identified himself with the poor rather than the rich. Jesus teaches us to do the same. He wants us to identify with those who are burdened: needy, the sick and the suffering.

Jesus identified himself with the donkey which was an animal used for carrying load, thereby fulfilling Isaiah 53:54, "He took up our pain and bore our suffering." Like the donkey, Jesus carries our pain and suffering. We are invited to always bring to Jesus our pains and sufferings.

Jesus' humility by riding on a donkey instead of a horse teaches us to correct our unhealthy pride, materialistic behaviors and tendencies. In Matthew 11:29, Jesus says, "Learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart."

The palm frond we use during Palm Sunday is a reenactment of what took place on Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. However, a deeper meaning is that in time of war or crisis, palm frond is a symbol of peace. The people, without knowing it, crowned Jesus King of Peace. In the Igbo culture of Nigeria, if someone who has problem with another brings palm frond to the other, it means an invitation to make peace. I would recommend that anyone who is having problem with another should take a blessed palm to the person as a symbol of unconditional peace.

Blessed palm is not to be thrown around or discarded as trash. It is a sacred object. It is kept reverently until next year when it is returned to the church to be burned and used on Ash Wednesday.

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..."