

Homily of Palm Sunday Year B, 2021

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 is the sixth and last Sunday of Lent and it is called Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord. It commemorates the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, days before he was crucified. Palm Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week. The Passion narrative from the Gospel of Mark invites us to participate in the passion journey of Jesus Christ.

Almost all Jewish prophets prophesied the coming of the messiah who was to 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. 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).

I don't think that the people would have given Jesus such a 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. If Jesus had overthrown the Roman leadership, everyone would have stood behind him. He would not have been crucified. Do we do as the Jews and the crowd did? We get very disappointed, and frustrated, and upset when our expectations are not met, or when we fail to get what we want. Then, we become aggressive, destructive, or even murderous.

As we read in the gospel, Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on 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." As a donkey carries load, Jesus carries our pains and sufferings.

During Jesus' 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 the burdened, the needy, the sick and the suffering. And 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."

What do the palm leaves symbolize?

In some cultures, in times of crisis or misunderstanding, carrying or presenting palm leaves is a symbol or a gesture of peace and reconciliation. Therefore, the palm leaves symbolize Jesus as the King of Peace. We are, therefore, invited to peace and reconciliation with one another. 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.

In some cultures, palm leaves symbolize sacredness and victory. Jesus, the Good Shepherd and the Sacred Lamb of God came to bring victory over evil. In Hebrew, 'hosanna' means, 'save us now.' We pray to God to 'save us now' from our burdens.

In some cultures, palm leaves symbolize eternal life. Jesus is the way to eternal life. Jesus says, "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life" (John 3:14-15).

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 our sins not stop Jesus' entry into our lives. 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).

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..."

Fr. Martin Eke, MSP