

Sunday Without Palms

By David G. Bonagura, Jr.

This Sunday, in countless Catholic churches the world over, palms will not be given to the faithful this year. Many of us will watch piously through our screens as priests begin by blessing the palm branches in an action that make this Mass so distinct, so memorable, and, normally, so tactile. But not today. We will not be present to receive our palms, to hold them as the gospel of Jesus' triumphal ascent into Jerusalem is read, to make crosses out of them, to thread them through our crucifixes upon returning home. It is a Sunday without palms.

The annual commemoration of our Lord's passion is not meant to be melancholic. Catholics rightly celebrate the events of Holy Week, knowing that the sorrowful passion is the means of our more glorious redemption. And so we begin Mass on this day with a note of triumph: "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, the king of Israel. Hosanna in the highest!"

This year, however, our joy is tempered, with the coronavirus keeping us from reliving these mysteries as we ought. Ours is a historical religion, and it is through the Holy Week liturgies, above all, that we are mystically transported to the very moments that changed the world—and each of our lives—forever. Now we have to relive our history with our senses and souls deprived of the accessories, smells, sights, and even the liturgical celebrations themselves.

Instead, we will find our historical anchor in something that transcends the senses: the deprivation the disciples felt between the passion and the resurrection.

Normally, receiving palm branches is the first act of our paschal celebration, and it points ahead to the end of the story a week hence. Christ enters Jerusalem today hailed by all as the king of the Jews. The palms, explains Pius Parsch, are "symbols of our loyalty to Him and of our willingness to do Him homage."

This procession was one of the few times in His life that our Lord acquiesced to public honors. He only did so on His terms, upsetting all our expectations of what we think a king should be. He received gold, the symbol of kingly power, only as a helpless infant. Now, as a man who has manifested unimaginable power, He chooses the meekness prophesized by Zechariah, repeated in today's Mass: "Tell the daughter of Zion: Behold,

your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on an ass, and on a colt, the foal of an ass.” (Matt 21:5)

“He is the king of peace,” writes Joseph Ratzinger, “and by God’s power, not His own.”

In just a few days, the lauds will turn to sneers: “We have no king but Caesar!” A distressed Pilate puts the question to Jesus, “Are you the king of the Jews?” “My kingdom is not of this world,” He replies. He is Lord not just of a particular people, nor even of “this world.” He transcends all that this world has to offer. He is truth itself, the very foundation upon which the world rests. “For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice.” (John 18:37)

Those who reject the truth send Him to the cross, the most ironic of thrones for the king to mount. In Palm Sunday’s gospel, we hear the chief priests ridicule Him: “He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now.” (Matt 27:42-43) He does come down—dead. He is buried in a tomb, sealed by a giant stone. His disciples had seen the miracles and had heard the spellbinding discourses. Now they have nothing. They walk away empty handed.

Today we, too, are empty handed. We are not holding the palms of victory this year. Unlike the disciples, we know how the greatest story ever told ends, and we draw hope from it. But in that second greatest story, that of each of our lives, we feel the confusion, emptiness, and pain from the coronavirus’s devastating path: lost income, jobs, and loved ones. And the loss of the Mass, the one anchor in an otherwise tumultuous world, makes this all the more painful.

Knowing our need to see and to touch, the Church offers our senses a vertible feast during Holy Week se we do not just revisit the paschal mystery, but feel it, live it. By force this year, we are challenged to take up another spiritual means, that of the greatest saints in our history: the way of deprivation and raw faith. Aids to belief have been removed. We instead must follow the declaration from Holy Thursday’s procession: “Let faith supply for the senses’ defect.”

Easter will come, with or without its public celebration. Even then, we learn through Mary Magdalene that deprivation is part of the life of faith: “Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father.” (John 20:17) We have the victory without the palms, because we have faith in Jesus Christ, victor over death.

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