

## **Sermon Palm Sunday 2020**

All over the world tribes and cultures celebrate their history by re-enacting in public the great moments in their past, with the claim that these were the events which forged their national and religious identity. The Christian world has, since the Resurrection of the Lord, proclaimed its presence by the public demonstration we call the Feast of Palms. The procession you might have had around this parish and into this church has been a piece of public sacred theatre, meant to be watched and wondered about, on a par and equal to the most expressive street theatre in the world, up there with Chinese dragons, remembrance marches, circus acrobatics and the Moomba Festival.

Some public displays for pure entertainment, others are didactic in intention. But the procession of palms is a public witness, an efficacious performance of God acting among us as Healer and Rabbi, Prophet and Redeemer, King and Lord. The western world today is weary of religion or the concepts of obedience, morality and authority.

Would you have wondered, as you held your palm cross aloft to be blessed with holy water and incense, what such a commotion was all about? Drivers and pedestrians on the street who would have observed you as in years past surely wondered at this less than usual degree of fanaticism.

St Matthew the Evangelist surely understood the significance of that first procession of palms as he recounted the events around the Triumphal Entry of Jesus to Jerusalem. After relating the parable of workers in the vineyard, Jesus foretold his betrayal and death, by saying, 'Behold we go to Jerusalem'. He then announces that he must die alone, that he came not to be served but to lay down his life in service. On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus visits great crowds in the ancient city of Jericho, where he heals two blind men by his divine power.

Matthew's Chapter 21 relates the drama we have all repeated in street theatre, on the roads or round the parish or at home today. As a prophet, he calls for an ass to ride, a young colt, the lowliest of beasts upon which a king might sit.

One of the loveliest of icons to arise from Eastern Orthodox Byzantine tradition reveals the entire pageant: the donkey with its head bowed in reverence, King Jesus sitting side saddle upon villagers' garments, clothes spread in the road showing their humility in the face of the Christ, Anointed One.

Olive branches are laid in his path, while children climb trees to retrieve branches of that desert shrub, the olive, brought by the dove to assure Noah of peace upon earth. Eleven disciples follow the rider in awe, as voices call out words they had learned as children from Psalm 118 v. 26 – ‘Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord’.

As this motley procession approaches the city of Priestly Peace, resident citizenry wave greeting from doorways and skylights. And from the main town entrance appear the elders in welcome. ‘Lift high ye gates, and be ye lift up the everlasting doors; and the King of Glory shall come in’.

You and I are about to travel another short pilgrimage, in which is also a drama of witness to a hedonistic world. This procession is called Holy Week and culminates in the Solemn Triduum of the Lord’s Passion and Death. Some Christians feel the drama deeply in their souls, others accept the disciplines but feel more objective about it, akin to being spiritually alone or dry.

What I may say to you, wherever you are on the devotional spectrum, in church or at home: value this week for whatever grace the Lord may offer you. He will grant you peace and concentration for the needs of your soul. Since you cannot attend Mattins or Evensong each day, make a protracted act of thanksgiving for your health and happiness; offer sorrow for the sinfulness which enters your life; pray for all loved ones, for your church and for those who suffer in the name of Jesus, under persecution or contagion.

None of us can presently be at public Mass, therefore let us make it our joy to attend to some devotion at the time when we normally be there. You cannot make confession in the presence of a priest, so ask for Christ’s Absolution as you sign yourself with the cross. Join with others spiritually in the Stations of the Cross. Perhaps you can do this on paper with fourteen circles and the titles of Jesus’ Passion. A few may prefer to do is as a rosary. Offer a token of help to another person in silent reparation to the Sacred Heart for your own shortcomings. Be generous in your gift to Holy Church for her ministry in your own life. Plead the prayers of St Mary, St Joseph or your name saint, praying for the protection of the Holy Angels. Perhaps you will be able to spend time in silent meditation on one or other of the readings for the day. Or any psalm you have noticed when at worship. Say a forgiving prayer for any person who has given you

offence. When lost for an idea for a prayer to say, try a slow reading of Psalm 139, 'O Lord thou has searched me out and known me'.

Allow me now to wish you every joy in holiness and a very blessed Easter celebration as the Lord allows it to you this year. Amen.

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