

Palm Sunday

I take as my text today from St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians:

....and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.

Today, we blessed palms and processed joyfully with them into the church to commemorate that day in the ministry of our Lord when he rode into Jerusalem just like an earthly king would do.

But, as we begin the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, we become aware that there is no mention in our propers, the Collect, Epistle, or Gospel, of that joyful occasion.

We, instead, and not without good reason, focus attention on our Lord's Passion, rather than that triumphal moment.

Indeed, it seem a shame that such a defining event in the final days of Christ's life should be omitted from the Prayer Book.

Such omission reflects the rigidity of the Reformers of the 1500's when the Book of Common Prayer was taking form. The so-called Reformers were fearful of the possibility of palm branches being blessed; indeed, they were fearful of any blessing of material objects for whatever reason.

We may say so-called Reformers, because their zeal for reform went too far, often to the detriment and destruction of so much that was beautiful, edifying, and spiritually uplifting in the Church.

Fortunately, the purposeful omission of any mention of palms or Palm Sunday, per se, has not dampened the spirit of that momentous event or deterred the practice of the blessing of palms used in marking that celebratory occasion.

How could anyone even want to diminish that singular moment when Jesus openly, publicly proclaimed his Messiahship.

Especially, when all that Jesus endured, his entire earthly life, His every moment, was a testimony to God's unchangeable, unfathomable Love.

St. Paul, in the Epistle passage to the Philippians that we read today, without mention of that singular event, takes us to the heart of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem on what became known as Palm Sunday.

What we hold and firmly acknowledge today was openly declared in the act of Jesus riding into the city on a donkey while throngs cheered and lay palm branches in the roadway. They cheered, proclaiming that the Messiah has arrived. That he is here, here in the midst of us. That the time has come when they will be saved from our slavery; the oppression will be lifted; and a new era will begin.

Yes, the crowds were right: it was a new era; the Messiah had revealed himself; they and all the world would be saved from slavery and oppression. Hosanna, hosanna to the Son of David!

What they did not understand at that moment is that the oppressor the Messiah had come to defeat was not Rome but Satan; it was not their slavery to Caesar but their slavery to sin from which they would be freed.

Christ's preaching, teaching, and miracles were not enough. What the people wanted was something tangible not spiritual. Satan was not their immediate concern; it was the Roman occupiers. For them, it was not the oppression of sin that affected their daily lives but the insidious and evil Roman Empire.

Repent and be saved. Saved from what! From the bondage of the Law? No, what the Jews wanted was to be saved from the pervasive Romans. Their bondage came from Rome. What they wanted was a king who could rid their land of this evil, this oppressive foreigner who had taken over every aspect of their lives.

How frustrated must our Lord have been: rejected by his own people. How broken-hearted he must have been when denied by those who, out of love, he had come to save.

But Jesus knew this was to be; he knew he would be denied; and he knew that his only option was perfect obedience of his Father, even suffering the humility of death on a cross.

Jesus rode into Jerusalem to the shouts of "Hosanna, Hosanna to the Son of David" knowing that he would be rejected, denied, even despised, feeling the hurt to the very depths of his heart.

Here was the true King, the true Messiah. He was not riding to defeat but to victory. He was not defeated by death on the Cross; rather he defeated death by the Cross. That very Cross, the symbol of death, instead became through Jesus Christ the symbol of life.

However theologians may define, interpret, or analyze the Gospel of Jesus Christ and that sacrificial act on Calvary, what is laid before us is clear: Jesus Christ, God Incarnate, lived a human life in perfect obedience and love and willingly, lovingly offered himself as the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, defeating death and Satan on the wood of the Cross.

What is required of us is in a real sense quite simple: accept his love; accept his Messiahship; accept him as our King; acknowledge that he IS our Lord and Saviour.

Simple? Yes. When we do accept Jesus Christ, opening our hearts to him and giving him free reign over us, all the difficulties of the world fade, the power of Satan diminishes, the Holy Spirit flows in and through us, and darkness gives way to light.

During Lent, our focus all too often centers more on what Jesus did than why. We focus on the Cross, not the empty Cross of a Risen Lord, but the Cross with our Saviour nailed to it. In a sense, the Crucifix becomes central. While we may see our sins nailed to the Cross with our Lord, it is his Death and Passion that retains our focus.

Perhaps, in this last week of Lent as we follow the footsteps of our Lord to Calvary, we should refocus our attention, not away from the Cross, but toward the reason our Lord chose this journey.

St. John, in his long life, stressed over and over the reality of Christ's Death and Passion: it was an act of love.

By and through this act of love, mankind was redeemed, reconciled, and offered eternal life.

By the way of the Cross, God has provided the means to attain to that eternal life. By our Lord's Victory over Satan and death, freely offering his Life for ours and washing us with his Blood, we are made clean again. So, for us, the empty Cross remains a symbol of God's Love, his Grace, and his Mercy.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday, the people proclaimed a truth they did not yet understand: Hosanna to the King. Yes, he is King, but King in a way which they were unable to perceive. He rode into Jerusalem following his chosen path to the Cross, the King on his way to victory.

He won the Victory through his perfect obedience and perfect love. He defeated Satan and death and won for us the opportunity for eternal life. And he left us the perfect symbol: an empty Cross.