

PALM SUNDAY (C): The meaning of Jesus' Holy Week sufferings.
Gospel of the Palms: Luke 19:28-40: Jesus acclaimed as Messiah – for now.
At Mass - First Reading: Isaiah 50:4-7: God's servant is insulted;
Second Reading: Philippians 2:6-11: Christ's self-emptying, then glory;
The Passion: Luke 22:14 – 23:56: Last Supper to burial; the good thief.

Here is a confession (and this surprises some younger colleagues when I tell them): I have never preached at Mass on Palm Sunday, believing that the long liturgy is self-explanatory. But that lazy approach is not possible in an on-line homily, so here goes. I think that many may agree with me that the RC Church's difficult weekday readings for the 5th week of Lent were selected by Vatican officials with little idea of parish life, or ordinary people's needs. However, for Holy Week, they did a superb job. Palm Sunday's readings give a true sense of what we should think about Jesus' final days: how a triumphal entry into the Holy City quickly led to confrontation with the various Jewish authorities there, culminating in a criminal's execution by the Romans.

To deal with his entry first: this was clearly a messianic statement – his group of followers shouting, “*Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!*” left no room for doubt. (It also makes most scholars agree with St John's Gospel – that Jesus must have been to Jerusalem several times already in his public life, to build up both a support-base there and a big group of opponents.) Some Pharisees objected to the crowd's exuberance, but Jesus said, “*If these were silent, the very stones would cry out!*” Mind, to balance this, he rode on a young donkey – hardly the same as on a white charger, or in a solemn carriage! So, this was messiah-ship with a difference: it reflected the humility of God's Suffering Servant, that mysterious Old Testament character in Isaiah, who is the subject of the first reading at Mass. The crowd still venerated Jesus as God's chosen instrument – the waving of palms (mentioned by Matthew & Mark, but not here by Luke) was a traditional symbol of joy & acclamation.

The Church has always linked this entry of Jesus with his Passion later in Holy Week; that is why today's Mass readings have a ‘Good Friday’ feel about them. The first one, from the third of the four Songs of the Suffering Servant, shows the Servant being prepared to “*offer his back to those who strike*”, and “*his cheeks to those who pull out the beard*”; he did not “*hide his face from disgrace & spitting*”. Jesus was to fulfil his messiah-ship in a way unimaginable to most Jews at that time – by suffering an ignominious death, in public, naked, on a cross.

This is also the theme of St Paul, in the second reading, from his emotional Letter to the Philippians. In one of the most important passages in the New Testament, Paul echoes the start of St John's Gospel: Jesus had had a pre-existent life "*in the form of God*", sharing "*equality with God*". But he did not cling to this – he "*emptied*" himself to become one of us; worse – "*he humbled himself, by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross*". From this awful state, God "*has highly exalted him*" and given him glory, a glory we should acknowledge.

I think it is impossible to over-state the importance of this for our faith. People often dismiss religion as irrelevant to the evils of the world – especially the continuing slaughter of unarmed civilians in Ukraine, or even the financial damage to ordinary people caused by current American policies. This is when we must remember that in Jesus, God's co-equal Son, God Himself suffered the worst that we humans can do to each other. For Biblical writers, this is the supreme demonstration of divine love. In theory, there could be a world with no bad people causing pain; but, given that so many human personalities have a nasty streak, it is hard to imagine this perfect world, unless all our free-will and ability to choose were abolished. The world is as it is; God's Son suffered the consequences of it – as must we.

St Luke's account of the Passion (in 2 long chapters) follows the pattern of the other three gospels. Assuming that the story is familiar, I'll mention just the one point: Luke's reference to the "good thief" - but far better to call him the 'repentant' thief. Both he and his friend had been criminals; the other abused Jesus in much the same way as the onlookers had done – "Come on, do a miracle and prove yourself" – and so on. This man could see Jesus' real nature and uttered that famous prayer, "*Jesus, remember me, when you come into your Kingdom.*" In reply, he was assured, "*Today, you will be with me in Paradise.*" How any dying sinner would love to hear those words!

I have always thought of Palm Sunday as a 'bitter/sweet' day. Jesus' welcome turned into the bitter experience of trial & execution within a week. Our world is also 'bitter/sweet' just now. Any glance at the TV news reminds us of the bitterness of war, violence and financial hurt inflicted on ordinary people. The world is a difficult place; Holy Week reminds that our God came to share our messy and cruel state. However, through his love & power, he has offered us a possible way out of it. *Fr Jim Dunne.*

