

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's an admission for you (and this surprised my younger colleagues when I told them recently): I have never preached at Mass on Palm Sunday, believing that today's (long) liturgy is self-explanatory. Shock! Horror! But that laziness is not an option now, so here goes. I, and many others, think that most of the weekday readings towards the end of Lent were selected by officials in the Vatican who had little idea of parish life, or ordinary people's needs. However, for Holy Week, they did a superb job. Today's readings give a true sense of what we need to accept 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, “Blessings on 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 had been to Jerusalem several times already in his public life, building up both a support-base there, as well as a big group of opponents.) Some Pharisees objected to the crowd's exuberance, but Jesus said, “If these keep quiet, the stones will cry out!” Mind. to balance this, he rode on a young donkey – hardly the same as a white charger, or 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 topic 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 struck him”, and “his cheeks to those who tore at his beard”; he did not “cover his face against insult and spittle”. 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 a "divine state", sharing "equality with God". But he did not cling to this – he "emptied" himself to become one of us; worse – "he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross". From this awful state, God "raised him high" and gave him glory, a glory we should acknowledge.

I think it's impossible to over-state the importance of this for our faith. People often dismiss religion as irrelevant to the evils of the world – be it the drawn-out problems of the pandemic, or the cynical and senseless slaughter of unarmed civilians in Ukraine. That's 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's 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 (two long chapters – phew!) 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, "Remember me, when you come into your Kingdom." In reply, he was assured, "This day, 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. The nice welcome Jesus got would turn into the bitter experience of trial & execution within a week. Our world is also 'bitter/sweet' just now. With the pandemic's effect lessening (though still very infectious), we might feel 'sweet'; but any glance at the TV news from Ukraine reminds us of the bitterness of war and violence inflicted on people as ordinary as us. 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.*

