

PALM SUNDAY IS 50: 4-7; PHIL 2: 6-11; LK: 22: 14-23 -- 23: 56

The bishop of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris during the early part of the last century was a great evangelizer who tried to reach out to unbelievers, scoffers, and cynics. He liked to tell the story of a young man who would stand outside the cathedral and shout derogatory slogans at the people entering to worship. He would call them fools and other insulting names. The people tried to ignore him but it was difficult. One day the parish priest went outside to confront the young man, much to the distress of the parishioners. The young man ranted and raved against everything the priest told him. Finally, he addressed the young scoffer by saying, "Look, let's get this over with once and for all. I'm going to dare you to do something and I bet you can't do it." And of course the young man shot back, "I can do anything you propose, you white-robed wimp!" "Fine," said the priest. "All I ask you to do is to come into the sanctuary with me. I want you to stare at the figure of Christ on His cross, and I want you to scream at the very top of your lungs, as loudly as you can. 'Christ died on the cross for me, and I don't care one bit.'" So the young man went into the sanctuary, and looking at the figure, screamed as loudly as he could, "Christ died on the cross for me, and I don't care one bit." The priest said, "Very good. Now do it again." And again the young man screamed, with a little more hesitancy, "Christ died on the cross for me, and I don't care one bit." "You're almost done now," said the priest. "One more time." The young man raised his fist, kept looking at the crucifix, but the words wouldn't come. He just could not look at the face of Christ and say those words anymore. The real punch line came when, after he told the story, the bishop said, "I was that young man. That young man, that defiant young man was I. I thought I didn't need God but found out that I did."

The Church celebrates today as both Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday. It is on Palm Sunday that we enter Holy Week, welcoming Jesus into our lives, asking him to allow us to share in his suffering, death and resurrection. This is also the time of year we stop to remember and relive the events, which brought about our redemption and salvation. The Holy Week liturgy makes present for us the actual events of the dying and rising of Jesus. Further, the liturgy enables us to experience in our lives here and now what Jesus went through then. In other words, what we commemorate and relive during this week is not just Jesus' dying and rising, but our own dying and rising in Him, which will result in our healing, reconciliation, and redemption. Just as Jesus did, we too must lay down our lives freely by actively participating in the Holy Week liturgy. In doing so, we are allowing Jesus to forgive us our sins, to heal the wounds in us caused by our sins and the sins of others and to transform us more completely into the image and likeness of God. Thus, we will be able to live more fully the divine life we received at Baptism. Proper participation in the Holy Week liturgy will deepen our relationship with God, increase our faith and strengthen our lives as disciples of Jesus.

The first part of today's gospel describes the royal reception, which Jesus received from his admirers, who paraded with him for a distance of two miles: from the Mount of Olives to the city of Jerusalem . Two-and-a-half million people were normally present to celebrate the Jewish feast of the Passover. Jesus permitted such a royal procession for two reasons: 1) to reveal to the general public that he was the promised Messiah, and 2) to fulfill the prophecies of Zechariah (9:9) and Zephaniah (3: 16-19): *"Rejoice heart and soul, daughter of Zion.... see now your king comes to you; he is victorious, triumphant, humble and riding on a donkey..."* (Zech. 9:9).

Do I welcome Jesus into my heart? Am I ready to surrender my life to Him during this Holy Week and welcome him into all areas of my life as my Lord and Savior, singing "hosanna"? Today, we receive palm branches at the Divine Liturgy. Let us take them to our homes and place them somewhere where we can always see them. Let the palms remind us that Christ is the king of our families, that Christ is the king of our hearts, that Christ is the only true answer to our quest for happiness and meaning in our lives. And if we do proclaim Christ as our king, let us try to make time for Him in our daily life; let us be reminded that He is the one with whom we will be spending eternity. Let us be reminded further that our careers, our education, our finances, our homes, all of the basic material needs in our lives are only temporary. Let us prioritize and place Christ the king as the primary concern in our lives. It is only when we have done this that we will find true peace and happiness in our confused and complex world.