



SERMONS THAT WORK

Palm Sunday

Victory

[RCL] Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Matthew 26:14- 27:66 or Matthew 27:11-54

Today we celebrate Palm Sunday, the triumphal procession of Christ through the streets of Jerusalem, when the men and women of the city shouted out “Hosannah!” to the Son of David, and laid at his feet... cloaks and branches? Why do we call it Palm Sunday when St. Matthew tells us that they laid out their winter wardrobe and yard trimmings? Shouldn’t this be called Down Coat Sunday? Brush Cutting Sunday?

If we turn to the Gospels of St. Luke and St. Mark, they also mention nothing but outerwear and tree limbs. It’s not until we reach St. John’s Gospel that we are told that the people were waving branches of palm. Why does St. John make such a point of this? And why skip the cloaks and oak limbs, to wave palms today? What exactly would the palm branch have meant to the people of Jerusalem?

We sometimes retain a symbol but forget its meaning. We all know what a trophy represents: it’s the symbol of victory. But if 1,000 years from now, archeologists began digging them up, they might just see them as meaningless, decorative objects. “Gosh, 21st century Americans just loved these gold-painted figurines — little golfers, ladies doing karate, soccer balls – what funny taste they had.” To them, a trophy might be no different from a Picasso or a Bob Marley poster. And so it is with our branches of palm. We imagine them to have been nothing more than the branches most readily available for waving, but to ancient people, this would sound ridiculous, because, for Greco-Romans, the palm had a very definite symbolic meaning: the palm shouted — VICTORY!

A victorious athlete in the ancient world would be given not a trophy but a palm branch. An ancient lawyer would affix palm branches to his door after winning a case, and most of all, a general, returning to the city in a triumph, in the Roman version of a post-war ticker tape parade, would hold a palm branch in his hand, and might even wear the *toga palmata*, a special toga, covered with palm branch designs. These are not simply objects to wave or leaves to soften the road; instead, the palm is the symbol of the victory of Christ, for this is the Lord’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Today, he is pictured as a conquering general, as having utterly routed and defeated his enemies. But what exactly is this victory? Who has been defeated and when?

To answer this, we must look not to the past three years of his preaching and teaching, but to today's second reading: the three days of his death and resurrection, for it is in his passion and death that he meets the forces of evil face to face, and the radiance of Christ, the love of Christ, the goodness of Christ utterly vanquish and forever break the emptiness, coldness, and darkness of death itself.

The palms of the people of Jerusalem are an expression, both of faith in this unconquerable King of Glory — they are so sure of his victory that they give him the triumphal parade *before* he goes off to war rather than when he returns — and a recognition of the eternal nature of his defeat of the enemy, for from his entry into Jerusalem, from his incarnation, even from the creation of the world, it was already a foregone conclusion that evil *didn't have a chance*.

We join the people of Jerusalem in this celebratory parade and then bring these blessed branches of palm into our homes to serve as reminders throughout the year that Christ is utterly victorious, and that no suffering, no horror has a chance at lasting, because Jesus Christ has defeated evil for all time.

But we say this... in a world where missiles rain down on civilians in war zones, in which Turkish and Syrian families continue to mourn and rebuild after the deaths of thousands in a catastrophic earthquake. We say that Christ has defeated evil in the midst of mass shootings and rampant racism, we say that Christ has defeated death in the face of cancer and heart disease.

What exactly does the victory of Christ look like in *this* kind of world? It looks like the faith of the people of Jerusalem: in this inspired moment, they know that the raging of the enemy, the horrors of death, the sufferings of this life are not true reality, but a momentary blip on the screen, soon to be wiped out forever. We as Christians are called to live in the light of this victory. Not by sugar-coating life and pretending it's all hunky-dory, but by looking death in the eye and not flinching. We as Christians are called to see the sufferings of the world, and not run *from them*, but *towards them* — not to escape suffering, but to see how we can comfort, serve, and help.

Where in your family, in your neighborhood, or in the world is someone battling sickness? How can you as a Christian be a comfort to them? Be an agent of their healing? Where is someone isolated and alone? How can you as a disciple of Jesus bring them joy? Where is someone hungry, homeless, anxious? How can you proclaim the victory of Christ by feeding them, sheltering them, and bringing them peace? We are called to live here and now, in a world of death and corruption, but also to wave our palms. To show sin, evil, and death that they no longer have power, but have been defeated by the Lord Jesus Christ, and that, at any moment now, the eternal victory celebration will begin.

But this, as anyone who has tried it can tell you, is easier said than done. This is why the people of Jerusalem also cry out, "Hosannah!" to Jesus. We often imagine that Hosannah means something like "Hooray!" or "Fantastic!" as though it were a shout of rejoicing, but this is not the case at all: "Hosannah" is a request, a petition, a prayer, and means it "Oh God, make speed to save us!" For we on our own don't

have the courage, the grace, or the power to joyfully wave a palm in the face of evil, but Jesus, God the Son incarnate, working in us and through us does.

This Easter, how is God calling you to change? To be less anxious and more joyful, to be free to serve others in the light of Christ's victory? Shout out Hosannah to Jesus, invite him into your heart to transform you by his grace, and then take your part in his triumphal victory over evil and death.

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