

PALM SUNDAY OF THE PASSION OF THE LORD
THE KING WHO EMPTIED HIMSELF

“Blessed is He, Who comes in the Name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”

Today we celebrate Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord. It is a pity that because of the plaguing pandemic, we are not able to go on the usual procession with our palms and olive branches, reminiscent of the glorious day that Jesus entered into Jerusalem with the pomp and pageantry of King, who came to serve. Be that as it may, the significance of this day should not be diminished in any ways. Therefore, let us go up with the Lord; let us relive this day; let us participate on this last journey of our Lord into the Holy City. The Church invites us to be actively involved in our minds as we celebrate this day. Who among the crowd are we? Jesus? The apostles and disciples? The Sanhedrin? The chief priests? The Pharisees or the scribes? Or the visitors, who had arrived for the festival? Or are we an indifferent spectator? We need to personally identify ourselves and take our stance in the crowd.

The title the Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales gives to this celebration is very apt – “Palm Sunday of the Passion of our Lord.” This incorporates the two main significant images or points of this day – the Palm and the Passion. These embrace the two major parts of this celebration, namely the Blessing of the Palms/procession into the Church and the reading of the Passion narrative at the Gospel. These point to the contrasting moments on this journey. While the Palms portrays the joy, the glory and triumphant entry; the Passion marks the sorrow, the pain and the death of Our Lord. These also point to the two major characters in this ceremony – the people and Christ. Whereas the people were basking in the euphoria of a King; the Lord, sitting on the donkey, knew that His Passion and Death were imminent. The Church invites us today to take part in both the joy of the triumphal entry without losing sight of the approaching Death of our Lord. This is the spirit of the Holy Week that begins today.

The Significance of the Palm: If you read all the accounts of Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem, you will discover that although all the gospels record this important event, only John’s Gospel makes specific reference to the use of palms: “So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet Him” (Jn. 12: 13). Matthew and Mark agree on the use of “garments and leafy branches” (Matt. 21: 8; Mk. 11: 8). St. Luke only refers to garments, no leafy branches nor palms mentioned (Lk. 19: 36). This does not interfere with the veracity of the event in anyway, but are mere human preferences in the divine inspiration that does not compel the intellectual capacity of the authors but guides them to write without any fundamental errors. Palm branches had a place in the historical and political development of the Jews. Over a thousand years before Christ, the Jews had been dominated by one super

power or the other – Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks and Romans. However, Judas Maccabaeus (in 164 BC) and his brother Simon Maccabaeus (in 141 BC) conquered their overlords, reclaimed and purified the Temple desecrated by these pagans, and cleared the Citadel in Jerusalem. In the celebration of this victory, the Book of Maccabees reports as follows: “On the twenty-third day of the second month, in the one hundred seventy-first year, the Jews entered it with praise and palm branches, and with harps and cymbals and stringed instruments, and with hymns and songs, because a great enemy had been crushed and removed from Israel.” The palm was a symbol of Israel’s victory, liberation and freedom. Palm fronds appeared on the coins minted from 140 BC to 70 AD bearing the inscription: “For the liberation of Israel.” The entire scenario with the shouts of “Hosanna!” meaning “Save us, God!”, alerted the Romans, reminding them of the conquests of the Maccabean brothers, and so, dreaded a possible revolution. In the same vein, the Chief Priests, the Sanhedrin, the Pharisees and the Scribes, who were already threatened by the popularity of Jesus and feared He would dislodge them from their enviable religious and social status as the leaders of the people. These fears were unfounded. Neither the Romans nor the Jews knew Who Jesus was. They misconstrued Him as a political Messiah, but He was The True Son of God, The Messiah long promised in fulfillment of the prophecy by Zechariah (9: 9): “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout for joy, O daughter of Jerusalem! For, see, your king is coming, just and victorious, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

On the Foal of a Donkey: The donkey was Jesus’ silent response to the fears of the Romans and the leaders of the people. He communicated very typically in this informal way that His kingship was neither political nor military, but something more profound and supernatural. Nevertheless, they failed to understand because their minds were blinded by their prejudice, hatred and jealousy. The lowly animal shows that He, though a King, comes not as a warrior on the stallion of a horse to conquer the Romans, but on this beast of burden to conquer sin and death; to restore peace and reconcile man with God. And when He is lifted up, He will draw all people to Himself and offer us all to God as fruits of His obedience to the Father and love of the human family.

My dear friends, on this day, the Church invites us to journey with Jesus into the Holy City to be in the crowd but not let ourselves be swallowed by the deafening noise. As we shout the “Hosanna” sharing in the joy and the glory, we may need to ask ourselves whether our life is giving glory to God; if our life brings joy to the King Who died for us. As we stripe ourselves of our garments so that our Lord and King may walk on, we may need to ask what we need to stripe ourselves of in order to share in the true humility of our King. As we acclaim the King who seats on this lowly animal to serve His people from His Kingly state, we may need to ask how we manage the powers that we have – to serve or to lord it over; to empower

or to abuse those under our authority? As we journey into Jerusalem, this King, Who emptied Himself, invites us to be with Him, to walk in His company, sharing the humiliation of the Cross so that we can celebrate the glory of His Resurrection. May the grace of God be sufficient for us.