

The Sunday of the Palms and the Sunday of the Passion

April 01, 2007

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

Today marks the beginning of Holy Week, the week we must walk the *Via Dolorosa*, the *Road of Sorrows*. For some there has always been something of a festiveness about Palm Sunday, the distribution of the Palms, the excitement of the story of the procession through the crowd in Jerusalem, the Hosannas welcoming the one they call the King of Kings. There's no telling exactly what kind of parade it was that day going into Jerusalem. Pilgrims were coming to Passover from all parts of the known world. Like any parade or pilgrimage, it was a high time. The people hoped their world was about to be changed by this one man who was poised to disclose his personal heritage and reclaim the grandeur of Israel as he rode into the city of the great king. In Deuteronomy it is written, *we were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. He brought us out from there in order to give us the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors* (6:21-33). Jesus as the herald of the Kingdom of God, was the one to make the promise stick. The time of expectation was at hand. At last, their long delayed hopes were about to be fulfilled.

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So, why is the altar draped with a cloth the color of blood? Why are all the crosses veiled from our sight, even this one to my right? Where are the alleluias and the Glorias? Whatever reference we have heard of the Palm Sunday procession is overlaid by a long and dreadful Gospel account of a trial and crucifixion in which the only mention of a King was used by Pontius Pilate, and others, who used the term as a joke. Even the hymns and anthems speak of a wounded head, a broken, nail-torn body, a bitter Passion and a majestic ride to death.

Oh, yes, their long delayed hopes were about to be fulfilled, but in a way they could never have come close to fathoming, no matter how many Passion predictions Jesus had given them along the way. Delusion and denial are inseparable and *nowhere* will this be truer than in the week to come. How could they have expected a man without an army, without a penny to his name and without any political clout, how could they have expected such a man to be a mighty King? The bright eyed expectation of the Hosanna crying crowd within days will turn to disappointment and then into the ugly vehemence of a lynch

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mob. Those who today cry *Hosanna to the Son of David* will before the Sabbath comes shriek *Crucify him! Crucify him!*

And so we have a study in contrasts here in the way many people look at Palm Sunday and the way the Church wants us to look at it. We have this strange duality of a Sunday with two names: *The Sunday of the Palms and the Sunday of the Passion*. Is there any greater testimony to the tragic, fickle nature of human allegiance than what we see here?

And there is the suggestion here that we are an impatient people who have forgotten how to wait. In our impatience, there are many who try to turn Palm Sunday into a “little Easter, transferring some of the joy and excitement that belong to next Sunday, by anticipation, to this Sunday. We want to be at the goal of the Gospel without the pain of getting there. So, when the Church appoints St. Luke’s Passion for this Sunday and St. Paul’s thoughts (Philippians 2:5-11) about our Lord’s humble obedience even to death on a Cross, it is saying to us what every mother has said to her children, *not yet, not yet*.

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Jesus said it first to his own disciples when they confessed their faith in him, *Behold we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written of the Son of man by the prophets will be accomplished.... he will be mocked and spit upon; they will scourge him and kill him and on the third day he will rise* (Lk. 18:31-33). He was saying *not yet*.

God said it to him in the Garden when he prayed that the cup of suffering might pass from him.....*not yet, not yet*.

And this is how it must be. Christianity without Calvary would really be exactly what many people think it is: a hope in spite of the facts of life, held by those who are afraid to give it up; good advice which no body takes seriously because it won't work; dead history or lovely legend which is part of the folklore of our community, to be taught to children and forgotten by adults. Only the Cross establishes Christ's right to be heard among the world's religions. Only the Cross presents us with a God who is involved in the world's real life. Only the Cross makes it possible to believe that God is love and nothing less than love.

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So, while on Palm Sunday we find ourselves looking toward Easter and anticipating it, the Church is saying to us *not yet, not yet*.

First, share in the Cross as its shadow falls upon our own lives and learn what it is to walk on its way of pain and weariness and defeat. The Lord who calls us to follow is the Lord who provides the strength to see it through. It is the grace and power of God that have the mysterious capacity to transform crucifixions into resurrections.

Then when Easter comes, we shall know it for the miracle it is and receive our lives at the hands of God who loves us and *all* that he has created.

But for today, tomorrow and the next several days, the word is *not yet, not yet*. We still have much to see before we are ready to see Easter and know the joy of the Resurrection. For the moment, let us focus on, and never forget, this cornerstone upon

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which our faith is built, this Sunday of the Parade and the
Passion.

AMEN.