

Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the Word of God; consider the outcome of their life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Hebrews 13:7-8

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost +

There is a Mega Church just down the road from where we live. Usually I read their billboard shake my head and try to consider what their message has to do with Christian Faith. Usually.....however this last week I drove by and the billboard read “Join us for the Palm Sunday Drama”

Now I know by drama they mean something far different than what I am considering. They are planning for a play depicting the events of the day and that will be for some people is a wonderful way of remembering.

What I was considering deals with whole structure of our liturgy for Palm Sunday, the enormous symbolism that is depicted and finally the paradoxical shift which takes us from the joyful procession to weary walk up Calvary Hill. The “Drama” if I may use that word of Palm Sunday is to be for us a preview of the events to come in Holy Week and through symbolism a review of what God has done for His people.

What I propose is talking a little about the various physical elements of the liturgy as well as those events recounted in the reading and invite you to ponder their meaning as we move through Holy Week towards the Glory of Easter Morning.

I could begin by talking about how the Fathers of the Church and how they viewed fundamental allegorical interpretation, but the last time I did something like that Barbara commented to me, “Everyone knows you went to the seminary, and so if it really isn’t necessary for the people to understand, leave it out.”

Well, it’s not necessary for us to spend a lot of time talking about symbols and how the Fathers understood them. But, we do need to know that they did not view religious symbolism as modern culture views signs or symbols.

For them a symbol could reveal either a past event or point to a future promise and sometimes do both. For them that God would use the things of this world, the real and corporal nature of the symbols also revealed the ongoing presence of God in His Created Order. Thus I began this morning with the quotation from Hebrews, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Let’s go through the liturgy and see what I mean.

First, there is the procession itself. David’s City the Holy City and here is the descendent of David riding in Royal procession as did David. The symbolism is not lost on the religious and civil leaders of the day and neither should it be for us. David’s Son is coming to claim His rightful throne.

Fr. Ray Brown in his book The Death of the Messiah notes this one event as the triggering agent which leads to the crucifixion. Jesus was simply too great a risk for both the civil and religious leadership.

But there is also something odd about the procession. True, the prophet has Zechariah had proclaimed that the Messiah would come riding into Jerusalem on a donkey (I just think it's wrong to say ass in church so I'll so donkey). But the expectation of the people about Messiah was that he would be a mighty warrior and conquer and overthrow the Roman oppression. A mighty war horse would have fit their expectations and many might have been disappointed.

What part does that possible disappointment play in the crowds that shout Hosanna to the Son of David today shouting Crucify Him on Friday?

The roads we read are strewn with palm branches and people laid down their clothes in the street. The Fathers remember it was in a basket of woven palm leaves in which Moses lay riding on the water of the Nile waiting to be found.

And having been found by Pharaoh's daughter, Moses is able to fulfill his destiny of leading God's people from the desert of sin to the Promised Land. Now Jesus is riding upon the palm branches as did Moses in his basket. Jesus will finally lead those who will follow him from the desert of sin into the Promised Land.

Note that it is not the garland of a victor is laid before Jesus but the ordinary branches used for work, as bedding and covering to protect the homes of the people. It is fitting that something so ordinary would be used, because, he came to be one of us so that He could be both example and sacrifice. Not to be above us, but to be with us to raise us up.

And what of the clothing people laid before Jesus is there a symbol there? Today the people cover the trash and waste of animals that certainly covered the road with their clothes. Today, they would not even have his animal step in the dirt. On Friday when He is stripped naked and nailed to the cross there is no one to offer Him covering.

The stark contrast from the adulation of Palm Sunday to the absolute abandonment of Good Friday is itself a powerful symbol that remembers and prefigures for us. The God who is given us everything and wishes only for us to accept His gifts is rejected completely and utterly by His people.

Yes, when it is convenient and easy to remember God they have and still do, but when it is not convenient or life is easy and comfortable, they turn their backs to Him. This great denial from the people of God has an answer, and that answer is not rejection or punishment, but the ultimate demonstration of love. First, dying for us and then rising for us.

Each of the liturgies of Holy Week focuses us on one aspect of these mighty acts whereby we have been saved and set free. Today, we see laid out before us like the program of a theater drama what is to happen. We still have time to prepare, if we have not done so to celebrate the Paschal Feast and time to consider the rich symbols we will witness all week.

The servant ministry in the Maundy, the washing of feet, on Thursday and in the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament in the Garden we are reminded of the night Jesus waited and prayed before His passion.

Good Friday is the time for us to venerate the most Holy and important symbol, the Cross.

And then it all stops.....we pause the Altar has been stripped, the sanctuary cleared. It is to represent for us the emptiness of Christ's absence now buried in the tomb.

We pray for ourselves and for the world as we wait sharing the sadness and the fear of the disciples. They did not know what we know, that Resurrection occurred and Easter Morning was full of joy. But neither do we don't know whether we shall celebrate this Easter in the here and now or in the promised life to come.

As Christ emptied Himself first to take human form and then once again on the Cross, let us this week seek to empty ourselves, so that God's Grace may fill us as we walk to the Cross and then to the empty tomb.

AMEN