

Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord

This Sunday, known as “Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord”, is a special liturgy. If you are tempted to think of it as just another Mass but with a few additions, prepare to drop that assumption. Passion Sunday is a very deep vision into the heart and soul of Christianity.

The procession with Palms precedes the Mass. Before the procession we hear a Gospel reading which states the premise: Jesus is kingly and making a triumphal entrance into Jerusalem. People cheer wildly and the whole city is stirred to its depths. They layer his pathway with palm branches and even sprawl their coats upon it; he must not be sullied by the common roadway.

The Mass begins with the first reading from the passage from Isaiah called “The Third Song of the Suffering Servant,” one that Jesus knew well. “The Lord God has given me a well-trained tongue,” it says, “that I might know how to speak to the weary a word that will rouse them.” This he did and was applauded for it, even treated like a king; so far, so good.

But then things get interesting. “I have not rebelled, have not turned away. I gave my back to those who beat me...” Jesus allowed his own body to receive brutal scourging. Like the Suffering Servant, Jesus “set his face like flint” toward the humiliation that was to come. So the kingship of Jesus meant terrible suffering and humiliation, not simply publicity and grandeur.

The second reading has the words to a Christian hymn which Paul quoted, bringing out the same contrast. On the one hand Jesus had every right to be known as the greatest human being ever born (in the desert temptation Satan had tempted him to think this way) but on the other he “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.” “He humbled himself and became obedient unto death.” Is this what it means to be king?

The next verse of this ancient hymn says that God did exalt Jesus but God did not take away the passion or relieve him of the cup he was to drink. God showed that the greatness of kingship consists of love that is willing to sacrifice for others. Palm Sunday of the Passion of The Lord is about this contrast; kingship of splendor and fame versus kingship of service to others. The two Gospel readings present this vision.

All this is brought to a head in the gospel story of Jesus’ passion and death. What better way to show us what God’s kingship is really about? So, at last, Jesus was doing it – the thing he had preached about: give yourself for others. Now he was demonstrating real kingship.

There is a particularly poignant line in the account of Jesus’ death which says that when he died, “the veil in the sanctuary was torn from top to bottom.” Some may visualize this and think “now, they’ll know what a terrible thing they’ve done!”

But that line doesn’t refer to some ominous, dark sign at the moment of the crucifixion, meant to stun the world and prove it made a gross mistake. It refers to something else, not dark and fateful at all. The sanctuary veil was the curtain that hung between the people and the holy of holies, the most sacred of all places in the temple, and prevented them from seeing what was behind the veil. What the gospel writers are saying is that, at the moment of Jesus’ death, the veil which separated us from God was ripped open so that now we can approach God, he has been made accessible. Nothing separates us from God.

The cross, then, is the ultimate icon, the real depiction of the Holy. It shows us God's heart, the inner life of the Trinity. On the cross, there is not just one person, Jesus. Ultimately all three persons in the Trinity are on the cross.

On the surface we see Jesus, the Son. He is suffering and dying. He hangs on the cross in anguish, dying, alone, humiliated, misunderstood but he also hangs there in trust and fidelity, giving his life away without resentment, recrimination, or bitter questioning, because he knows and trusts deeply enough to, literally, believe in the sun even when it isn't shining, to believe in love even when he isn't experiencing it, and believe in God when God seems silent.

We see Jesus on the cross transforming hatred into love, curses into blessing, bitterness into graciousness, recrimination into understanding, and God's apparent silence into faith.

Less visible but clearly there, present as the one about whom this drama is ultimately about, is the Father. He is also on the cross, suffering with the Son, holding the Son in this darkness, showing himself worthy of trust waiting to give his response - the resurrection - which is not an act of vengeance, nor a bullying definition of who's in charge but an act of unfathomable redemption, understanding, forgiveness and love; an act that, more than anything else, defines God.

Finally, the Holy Spirit is also on the cross, uniquely generated and released by what unfolds there. As the drama of the crucifixion, the deep interplay of giving and receiving in love and trust, is taking place, a forgiving warmth, a healing fire, and unfathomable patience and understanding are being produced, revealed and released. This energy, the ultimate oxygen, which the gospels depict as spilling out of Jesus' pierced side as blood and water, is the Holy Spirit revealing the overflowing love between the Father and the Son.

Inside God, as we can see from the cross, there is no bitterness, vengeance, loss of patience, or lack of graciousness. When the veil inside the temple is torn, when the side of Jesus is pierced, what we see, what flows out, is forgiveness, patience, gentleness, understanding and warm invitation.

The cross, as an icon of this kind of love, defines God as love and gives us a picture of what that kind of love looks like and that which we are called to imitate.

