

Palm Sunday

Palm Sunday is a most exciting day of the liturgical year. It is like the final stage of a long walk when you have finally reached the base camp with the summit of the mountain before you. You can see now the goal of all your efforts. For forty days in Lent we have been making progress in our fasting, prayers and good works towards this week.

With Palm Sunday we begin that phase called holy week. It is the only week of the year we call holy. Each day is prefixed with this adjective because with the passing of each day we become holier and closer to those three great days called the Sacred Triduum (three days): Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday. These are the days of God's glory – his passion, his death and his rising. In simple terms, the nuts and bolts of Christianity. Everything leads to these events and everything else points back to them.

Now, being Palm Sunday, let us picture the Lord on his donkey before descending down into the holy city of Jerusalem. At the crest of a hill he stops amid the clamour of the crowds, who have followed him from Bethany, after seeing the resurrected Lazarus. With palm branches and cloaks strewn upon the cobblestone paths he surveys the beauty of the Temple and the fervour of the people who acclaim him as their King singing: Hosanna to the son of David, and then... he weeps. Perhaps he is alone in his sorrow among such festivity. I wonder how many saw God weep? Why did he weep and for whom? He wept for them whose hearts were so fickle - for today they exalt him as their King but on Friday condemn him to death, he wept for the Jews who would reject him as the Messiah and the inevitable destruction of the holy Temple by the Romans in the year 70 with the consequential diaspora of God's people. He wept for you and for me, and for those times when we reject him in our lives and lessen his abiding grace in our souls. Such is the cause of Christ's sorrow.

How many of these followers were faithless and fickle? They were led by the crowds then and we are led by the media now. In both cases those leading are hostile to holiness. If we think we can remain faithful to the very end without some special grace then we are fools. Palm Sunday reminds us of how much we need his divine power to persevere. After all, are we not fallen, prone to infidelity? If grace is to the soul what beauty is to the body – then some of us can be pretty ugly! In the words of CS Lewis we hairless bipeds are bent. We are all slightly bent out of shape and not true to form. How else can we explain the tragedy of the twelve apostles. Only one remained faithful – John, the beloved. And that was after so many years of formation; witnessing so many miracles, hearing so many words of wisdom. On that Thursday night Peter was fearful, Judas was an informer, James was weak, Philip did not pray and so on....

Some may argue, yes but Judas was fated to betray the Lord. The scriptures had to be fulfilled and that was Judas' role. The concept of predestination is a raw nerve for most people. Raw in the sense that it seems that free will is put on hold so that fate or destiny may be fulfilled. Such themes may seem raw but that is because we are only half-baked! The key that unlocks the conundrum lies in time: we are in chronological time and God is not – he dwells in eternity. We see each event as it unfolds in sequential order, God sees the whole affair altogether, beginning, middle and end as one. So Judas was free to choose to become a saint, he did not have to betray the Lord. At the Last Supper, Jesus provided him with three opportunities to repent, to turn back and seek forgiveness. But Judas' heart was now hardened, his faith was lost and he was bent on political revolution. Had he let the actual graces penetrate his soul on Holy Thursday night and repented then plan B would have emerged so that another person would have betrayed the Lord. Our fate or destiny is ours – we are not Hindus – and tied to our destiny are many graces that we can accept or spurn: such is gift of free will. We are not robots!

During this holy week, remain close to Our Lady, the Mother of Sorrows and see each of the events of our salvation through her eyes. It is with our Mother of Sorrows that we too in our present suffering and difficulties will persevere so as to remain faithful and then like St John we shall be called 'beloved.'