

Palm (Passion) Sunday

Homily by Most Reverend John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo

March 25, 2018

Palm Sunday
Cathedral of St. Mary, Fargo

For the past five weeks, we have been observing the season of Lent. In the Gospels of these weeks, we've heard of our Lord's temptation in the desert, and of his Transfiguration on Mount Tabor. We heard how he cleared the temple of money-changers and dishonest sellers. We heard him tell us that a grain of wheat must fall to the ground and die in order to bear a good harvest, and that we must be willing to part with this life if we wish to live forever. And now we come to Palm, or Passion Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week, the climax of these weeks of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving.

Our liturgy begins today with the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem. He was already well known there, and many were expecting him to come. The people came out in great numbers and acclaimed his arrival. They shouted "Hosanna" and waved palm branches before him. It often occurs to me that Jesus could easily have rallied this crowd and sent them to throw out the Romans and the Pharisees, just as he threw the money-changers out of the temple. He could have worked a sign of power and had them eating out of his hands. He could have set himself up as king in Jerusalem, and then later in Rome, and even over the whole world. Many of his own followers thought that's what he would do. Nothing could have stopped him; he could have settled everything and put down his enemies right then and there.

But he didn't. That was not why he came. Jesus didn't enter Jerusalem on a stallion, as a warrior king. He came on a donkey, an animal of peace, just as the prophet had foretold. He didn't come to sit on a throne and be served by conquered peoples. He came to kneel on the floor and wash the feet of his subjects. Jesus didn't come to rally people behind him and do battle against other people. He came to rally them to a new kingdom, one of love, peace, justice, and compassion. Jesus didn't come to condemn people, he came to forgive them. He didn't come to destroy his enemies, but to convert them, to reconcile them. Jesus didn't come to force people to follow him. He came to invite them.

It is this Jesus whom we greet today. It is this Jesus who wants to enter our hearts, in a special way, in this Holy Week. It is this Jesus who is in our midst right now as we begin our liturgy by processing through the church. And it is this Jesus who accepted the cross, and even died on the cross just a few days later. He chose to show his power not through conquest and violence but through love and forgiveness, through the blood that he willingly shed for you and for me, by the sacrifice he made of his life. Jesus entered Jerusalem humbly, on a donkey to set the stage for all that would follow, and even though he held absolute power in his hands, he made himself powerless to show the breadth and depth of God's love for all his children. He could have mounted a throne, but he chose instead to mount the cross, to empty himself, as St. Paul says in the second reading, so we might be filled with the divine life of God. Weeks before, when Jesus was transfigured on Mount Tabor, the apostles saw a glimpse of his divine glory, but now as he hangs upon the cross on the hill called Calvary we see the full revelation of God's unbounded love, a love that saves and gives life. He is that grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies, but that bursts forth with new life.

Jesus is showing us that God's plan exceeds all our expectations, and his love overcomes all of our sins. This broken world threw everything it had at Jesus: he was rejected and handed over by the leaders of his people. He was betrayed and denied by his own disciples, then beaten and scourged by pagans. He was sold out by Pilate to the mob, and then abandoned by all but a few of his family and friends. And to all of this, we must certainly add our own sins. We too have been indifferent, disloyal, ungrateful, hard-hearted. Our sins added to his suffering, and we can't escape that fact. But before this onslaught, Jesus remains faithful to his Father and to us. He pays the price, he accepts the cross, and he gives up his life to do for us what we could never do for ourselves: be reconciled with God once and for

all. Jesus assumed the lowest place, made himself the most pitiable of men so that we might be raised up, and exalted with him. And isn't it ironic that when Jesus breathed his last, it was a pagan, the Roman centurion, who said: "Truly this man was the Son of God." Right there, at the foot of the cross, our Lord won over an unbeliever, and so began the great work of reconciliation that Jesus was sent to accomplish, the conversion of every heart, and the opening of heaven to all who look upon him and believe.

Dear friends, I'm sure you'll agree with me that Holy Week is the most beautiful but heart-rending week of the year. The Church will observe this week with rituals and traditions that draw us into the events of the final days of Jesus' life. But the great purpose of this week is not simply to touch our emotions, but to deepen our faith. Emotions, sadness, exultation, these come and go, but these great events and mysteries of our faith remain. In today's great liturgy and the remaining celebrations of this coming week, we do not simply commemorate what Jesus did. We are plunged into the Paschal Mystery itself, the dying and rising of Christ. We are made one with him, and in him we find our salvation.