

Fr. Tim Ralston – Homily for April 17, 2011 (Palm Sunday)

For today's celebration of Palm Sunday, also known as Passion Sunday, the Church has given us two Gospel readings on which to think and meditate. And these two readings are quite different. In the first Gospel that we heard, Jesus is making His triumphant entry into Jerusalem. A large crowd is gathered to give him a hero's welcome, much like a king returning from a victorious battle. This is what the palm branches symbolized in the ancient world – victory. Jesus is riding into town as a victorious king. But we know that Jesus is not returning from a battle, but rather, to preparing for one. So, this victory parade, this celebration by the crowd, is actually taking place before the victory is won.

Now, turning to our other Gospel, we find the story of Christ's Passion. Many people that were part of the crowds that cheered His entry into Jerusalem have now turned against Him. They allowed themselves to be persuaded by some of the Jewish leaders against Jesus. So much so, that when Pilate offers them the chance to save the life of Jesus, they choose Barabbas instead. This prompts Pilate to ask, "What shall I do with Jesus called Christ?" And the response given, "Let Him be crucified!" So, the crowd has gone from shouting praises, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord," to crying out in condemnation of Jesus, "Let Him be crucified!"

Many of the people watched what happened to Jesus. They heard about His being arrested, they saw Him standing before Caiaphas the high priest, they heard the false testimony given about Jesus and saw Him accused of blasphemy. They watched Him being spat upon and slapped and led a way to Pilate. And they began to wonder; they started having doubts. Maybe this isn't the great king we thought He would be. Perhaps this isn't the long-awaited Messiah after all. They watched what was happening to Jesus, saw the beginnings of His suffering, and they couldn't take it. God would never allow His anointed one, the Messiah, to be treated like this, or so they thought. And so, they turned against Jesus and called for His death.

What the crowds didn't understand, though, - what they couldn't comprehend – was that it was precisely through the suffering and death of Jesus that His victory would be accomplished. All of the events of His Passion led to His glorious Resurrection, which was, and still is, the deciding battle in the war against evil. The Resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the victory that the crowds were unknowingly celebrating when Jesus entered Jerusalem. And it is also the same victory that gives all Christians hope today.

Because we know that Christ has offered to us a share in His victory over sin and death. His victory is our victory, if we but accept it. So, then, let us accept it today. Let us take hold of that victory and never let go. Let us today clutch the palm branches, for this is a symbol of Christ's victory. This is easy to do while we're still here in Church, celebrating this Mass. It becomes a whole lot more difficult once we leave here though. Difficult, yes; impossible, definitely not.

Because the war is over; the outcome is decided. Jesus is and always will be victorious over the devil and over sin and death. There are still battles taking place, to be sure – we fight them every day – but we fight with confidence when we fight alongside our Lord.

When we take up our weapons of prayer, the Sacraments, the Cross, our personal devotions and the gift of faith given us by God, then we fear no enemy. Inspired by this confidence, let us bravely face and celebrate this Holy Week – the holiest week of the year. We have welcomed Jesus as our victorious king today. May we not turn against Him, like the crowds did, as His Passion unfolds. But let us stay close to Him, as He gives Himself to us in the Eucharist, as He endures great suffering on our behalf, as He carries His cross, as He is crucified and as He commends His Spirit into the hands of His Father. Let us stay close to Him now so that we may be close to Him forever, as we share in His great victory – His Resurrection.