



Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord: 10th/11th April 2022

Reflection / Homily – Mgr Daniel McHugh

“Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord.”

A few years ago I was invited to Stoke-on-Trent by the Syro-Malabar Community for the celebration of Palm Sunday. I remember it well: the local priest is based in Our Lady of the Angels, but because of the large numbers of Syro-Malabar Rite Catholics the Mass for them is held in St Joseph’s Church Burslem. The large gathering outside the Church for the Blessing of Palms and the Procession with huge palm fronds and singing into the Church seemed closer to what happened on the day when Jesus entered Jerusalem to great acclaim and blessing as “the King who comes in the name of the Lord”. It is recounted in St Luke’s Gospel, this Year C of the cycle, in the commemoration of the Lord’s Entrance into Jerusalem at the beginning of Mass for Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord.

Father Hugh Gilbert OSB, of Pluscarden Abbey, now Bishop Hugh of Aberdeen Diocese, in his Homily for Palm Sunday, says “today we began the Mass with a procession. Perhaps it never quite comes off! But it’s meant to recall Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. In Jesus’ day, I believe, to approach Jerusalem from the direction of Bethany and the Mount of Olives was, in modern terms, to be ‘wowed’. Suddenly the city, in its splendor, burst upon the sight. Jesus processional entry into Jerusalem ended in the Temple.”

Branches of palm, olives, or sometimes even budding willow, are ancient symbols of victory and hope, as well as of new life. Psalm 23, one of the Psalms offered to accompany the Procession tells us about Our Lord’s role as our mighty king; it begins alluding to creation:

*“The Lord’s the earth and its fullness
the world, and those who dwell in it.
It is he who set it on the seas;
on the rivers he made it firm”*

It concludes:

*“O gates, lift high your heads;
grow higher, ancient doors.
Let him enter, the king of glory!
Who is the king of glory?
He, the Lord of hosts,
he is the king of glory”*

King David, to whom the Psalms are attributed, is exercising his poetic talents in saying this. As one commentator says: “He is personifying the gates and doors of the city. They

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may have been downcast and sorrowful; but now they can lift up their heads and be opened with joy...the king is coming! He will reign forever." This scene of triumph and excitement is the one we participate in on Palm Sunday. We too shout Hosanna in the Highest, an old Jewish cry for salvation as we wave our Palms celebrating His victory.

But, "how does a donkey fit this scene of triumph?" asks Fr Pollard in his commentary on the Procession into Jerusalem. He reminds us Jesus deliberately chose this animal; not so much as a symbol of His humility, but actually making a messianic statement about himself. It fulfils the messianic prophecy of Zachariah: "Rejoice heartily, O daughter of Zion; shout for joy, O daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king shall come to you; a just savior is he, meek, and riding on a donkey" (Zach 9:9).

Among the Jews, the donkey was a highly respected animal: for centuries they relied on it for both labour and transportation. The donkey was also a symbol of peace. In riding on a donkey, Jesus is telling the crowds what kind of king he really wants to be, and over what kind of kingdom he wants to preside. I thought of the scenes in Ukraine this past week where the graves of those murdered are being unearthed, and on TV Pope Francis was filmed embracing the child refugees at his Wednesday Audience saying "they are the result of the war".

The additional symbolism of the donkey is as a beast of burden and the dominant image of the Messiah is as a suffering servant. Pollard writes "If we see today's Gospel [the entry into Jerusalem] story through the lens of Isaiah we will not be able to separate impending tragedy from this scene of wild triumph" (cf Isaiah 50:4-7, the first reading at Mass).

Holy Week is all about love. This week we see how Jesus chooses fidelity to God's ways, which costs him his life. Jesus' journey through death to new life is the key to what lies in store for each of us. This Holy Week we have the special opportunity to join Him on that journey, beginning with His triumphant entry into Jerusalem.

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