



Palm Sunday of the Passion – 24 March 2024: Reflection by Mgr Daniel McHugh

The beginning of the celebration of the Paschal Mystery

On Palm Sunday of the Passion, 24th March this year, we are aware on entering our Churches that Holy Week is here: the most significant sign is that crosses and statues are covered in purple cloths. The statues will remain covered until the beginning of the Easter Vigil, and the crosses until the end of the celebration of the Lord's Passion on Good Friday. For many centuries the 5th Sunday of Lent, which was celebrated last Sunday, was called Passion Sunday while the Sunday after it was called Palm Sunday. It was called Passion Sunday because from this day the Church began to make the Sufferings of Our Lord her main focus. In the Gospel for the 5th Sunday we heard Jesus say in St John's Gospel "*Now the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.... And when I am lifted up from the earth, I shall draw all men to myself.*" By these words he indicated the kind of death he would die.

We read in Aleteia the popular Catholic website: Passion Sunday also marked the beginning of a special sub-season called Passiontide, which extended up to Holy Saturday. During this time the Church's Liturgy became more somber and a sorrowful mood was reflected. Palm Sunday was in the same celebration as it is today with the procession of Palm Branches and the reading of The Passion narrative. After the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) the Church decided to combine the two Sundays removing Passion Sunday from the Calendar and adding its name to Palm Sunday. This puts a greater emphasis on Palm Sunday and also reinforces the Passion narrative that is proclaimed on that day.

In using purple veils from this Sunday we are alerted to the special time we are in: Holy Week is a time when we are into immediate preparation for the Sacred Triduum – Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Sunday. We live in a veiled world, in exile from our true home, revealed on Easter Sunday with the celebration of the Resurrection of Our Lord, when we proclaim our Faith in our call to a Risen life in Him.

A central concept often mentioned in the Liturgy of Holy Week is "Paschal Mystery". The Catechism of the Catholic Church states "*The Paschal Mystery of Jesus, which comprises his passion, death and resurrection and glorification, stands at the centre of the Christian faith because God's saving plan was accomplished once for all by the redemptive death of his Son Jesus Christ.*" When the hour comes (see Jesus' words in St John's Gospel 5th Sunday) he lives out the unique event of history which does not pass away: Jesus dies, is buried, rises from the dead, and is seated at the right hand of the Father "*once for all.*"

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“The Paschal Mystery not only describes Christ’s self-emptying love leading to new life and glory; it also describes how believers enter into Christ’s Passover through the Sacraments” writes Rita Ferrone in *Commonweal*. She continues: *“the Liturgy is not about witnessing Christ’s death and resurrection on the altar. It is about sharing in Christ’s perfect self-offering and offering ourselves to God in communion with Him. The Paschal character of the Liturgy is found in the transformation of the elements of bread and wine into the living Christ, but it is no less about our transformation as partakers of his body and blood.”*

This is at the heart of Holy Week. We look forward now to the celebration of the Last Supper on Holy (Maundy) Thursday at the beginning of the Sacred Paschal Tridium: there we unite with the Lord Jesus, in His offering of His Body and Blood, our lives and our crosses so that dying to self in love with Him on Good Friday we rise to new life on Easter Sunday.

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