

PALM SUNDAY 2013

Two evenings ago some of our monks were discussing the question of the proper liturgical name for this Sunday. This did not surprise me, for there have been a couple changes in recent years. This day was formerly known as Palm Sunday, with the preceding Sunday called Passion Sunday, but in 1969 this name of today's feast was changed simply to Passion Sunday, the previous Sunday then being called the Fifth Sunday of Lent. Subsequently, and perhaps because the procession with palms continues to be a major part of the ceremony, the name was changed once more to what it is now, the rather lengthy "Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord." This new designation is a way of acknowledging that two different aspects of Jesus' final days on earth are being commemorated: first, his entry into Jerusalem, which was the focus of the opening rite, including the procession into church, and second, Jesus' passion, which we just heard in the account found in Luke's Gospel. Previously, there was an even further way of accenting the two foci: it was recommended that the main celebrant wear a cope for the opening rite, and then change from cope to chasuble for the service in the church itself.

Happily, we no longer have the cumbersome change of vestments, but there definitely remains a certain discordant note to the entire service. If you are wondering why this should be, the answer is historically rather clear: The procession with palms has come down to us from its origins in the ancient church at Jerusalem, where Jesus' entrance into that city was liturgically reenacted from the fourth century onward. But the reading of the account of Jesus' passion from one of the four Gospels comes from another city, the church at Rome. As one liturgical historian puts it, "The two traditions cross-pollinated and merged over the fourth through the eighth

centuries. Thirteen centuries later we may still experience the dual influences on this liturgy as relatively unhomogenized.”¹

On one level, this might seem regrettable. Wouldn't things be cleaner, neater, more harmonious if that kind of cross-pollinating merger had been avoided? Perhaps, but I want to suggest that there is at least one great symbolic value to what we actually have, for it reflects the fact that life itself, like the liturgy, is not something that can be neatly programmed according to some ideal of strict uniformity. Much of life is messy and unpredictable, and the persons who navigate it best are those who are able to accept things as they occur, making the best of situations that they would never have expected or chosen. Let me give two examples, each in some way relevant to today's feast.

Presumably like most churches throughout the world, we just sang a hymn that begins with the line “All glory, praise and honor to you Redeemer, King.” What few people probably know is that this was written in the ninth century by a bishop named Theodulph, who was at that time imprisoned by the emperor Louis the Pious, son of Charlemagne, under suspicion of having cooperated in a treasonous plot against Louis. This was a terrible change of fate for someone who had earlier been one of Charlemagne's most trusted advisors, a man who served as bishop of Orléans and was entrusted by Charlemagne to promote some important reforms in the Church of his day. To the end of his life, Theodulph protested to Louis his innocence of the charge of treason, but rather than sulk, he spent the years of his imprisonment writing many hymns and poems, including this hymn that has for centuries been sung on Palm Sunday in churches throughout the world—a wonderful example of how someone can make the best of a situation of adversity.

Much closer to our own time, today is the thirty-third anniversary of the assassination of the Salvadoran archbishop Oscar Romero, who was shot to death while offering Mass at a convent on the evening of March 24, 1980. Here, too, we have a man who had to face some of the most serious charges that could be leveled against a church leader. Whereas Theodulph was suspected of treason by a civil ruler, Oscar Romero was accused by some of his fellow bishops of manipulating the Bible and debasing the figure of Christ found therein. In responding to the wild charges they had made against him in a document they sent to Rome, he replied not with rancor but with simple honesty and humility, writing: "I recognize before God my deficiencies, but I believe I have worked with good will, far removed from the serious things I am accused of. God will have the last word, and I calmly hope to keep on working with the same enthusiasm as ever, since I serve our holy church with love."² Here, too, was a man who took very seriously the teaching of St. Paul in his letter to the Philippians. We just heard in our second reading Paul quoting an early Christian hymn that tells us of how Christ humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death, even death on a cross, but I hope you might recall from other occasions that the verse preceding this hymn, a verse not included in the Lectionary for today, gives the reason why Paul quoted the hymn at all: he admonishes all of his readers or hearers to have the very same attitude that was in Christ.

Archbishop Romero certainly had this attitude. Not only did he not strike back in anger over the accusations made by some of his fellow bishops, even more significantly he approached his impending death with the mind of Christ. Just as we heard Christ's words in our Gospel: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," so too did Oscar Romero forgive those who were out to kill him. He never sought martyrdom, but as the years went by and the death threats from government forces became more frequent, he became convinced of the great

likelihood that he would be assassinated. Here are his very words, uttered in an interview with a reporter just a few days before his death: “You can tell people, if they succeed in killing me, that I forgive and bless those who do it. Hopefully, they will realize that they are wasting their time. A bishop will die, but the church of God, which is the people, will never perish.”

At a time when, sadly, some of the bishops of our Church have not lived up to their responsibilities, it is heartening to know that we have had many saintly bishops down the centuries who have shown us the right way to follow the Lord Jesus both in life and in death. These go all the way back to the earliest centuries in men like St. Ignatius of Antioch, on through the Middle Ages in someone like St. Theodulph of Orléans, in the early modern era in St. John Fisher, and quite close to our own day in one whom many are already calling St. Oscar.

Like all of them, and like Jesus himself, we know that our own lives will never follow a straight and utterly predictable path. Like today’s liturgy itself, there will be inconsistencies, a lack of perfect harmony, surprises great and small. What really matters is how we deal with events as they come our way. At times we must all surely recognize that our past responses were far less than ideal, less than full of the trust that Jesus showed when he prayed to his Father in Gethsemani, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me; still, not my will but yours be done.” As we continue our Eucharist and prepare to receive this very Lord in Holy Communion, may we be as open as possible to the reforming and strengthening power of this greatest of sacraments.

¹ Benjamin M. Stewart, "Living the Word," *The Christian Century*, March 20, 2013, p. 22.

² Oscar Romero, quoted by James R. Brockman, *Romero: A Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989), 180.