

## PALM SUNDAY, 2015

There is a sense in which today's feast was for some years undergoing what might be called an identity crisis. When I and many of you were children, this day was simply called Palm Sunday. Then, in 1955, its name was changed to Second Sunday of the Passion or Palm Sunday, and finally (at least up to now!) it is officially Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord. One can easily understand the difficulty, for the opening ritual with its procession is quite different in tone from the Mass itself. The Commemoration of the Lord's Entry into Jerusalem recalls something joyful and festive, with crowds waving palm branches in acclamation or strewing those branches and even their cloaks on the road on which Jesus was passing by as they shouted "Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." But as the Mass begins, the tone becomes somber: our Opening Prayer refers to Christ's submission to the cross and his patient sufferings, the first reading foreshadows his passion with its reference to a mysterious Suffering Servant who does not shield his face from buffets and spitting, the reading from Philippians recalls Christ Jesus' obedience to the point of death, and the Passion according to Mark recounts not only our Lord's terrible physical suffering but his anguished cry of abandonment: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Some commentators try to tone this down by suggesting that those words about abandonment simply show that Jesus was beginning to pray the 22<sup>nd</sup> psalm, which ends on a note of triumph and exultation: "I will live for the Lord; my descendants will serve you. The generations to come will be told of the Lord, that they may proclaim to a people yet unborn the deliverance you have wrought." Yes, the psalm does end on that note, but I think it very misguided to suggest that this is what the evangelist is hinting at, for after that verse Mark has Jesus almost at once uttering one further loud cry and then breathing his last. Surely Mark is showing us the full extent to which Jesus shared our humanity, plumbing the depths not only of physical pain but of mental and emotional suffering as well. Blessed Martin of León, a twelfth-

century priest from whom we monks had a reading at Morning Prayer earlier today, surely got it right when he wrote: “So utterly did Christ efface himself for our salvation that during his passion it even seemed as if God had deserted him, so that he was impelled to cry out from the cross, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’”

Now is there any lesson for us in this radical change from one crowd shouting “Hosanna to the Son of David” and another crowd, only a few days later, mockingly taunting: “Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself by coming down from the cross.” One possible lesson could be taken from the older custom of having the congregation carry palms not only during the opening procession but also during the reading of the Passion, for a liturgical historian has pointed out that in this way the congregation is led recall that many of the same people who greeted Christ with shouts of joy on Palm Sunday would call for his death on Good Friday—a powerful reminder of our own weakness and sinfulness that causes us at times to reject Christ. Such reminder might be salutary, but I find that historian’s point unconvincing, for we have absolutely no way of knowing if any of those who greeted Jesus so joyfully on his entrance into Jerusalem were also among those calling for his crucifixion just a few days later. We will surely be on more solid ground if we simply recognize that the linkage of Palm Sunday with Good Friday—just a few days apart from each other—illustrates in the starkest manner possible the radically different stances one may take to Jesus, whether during his lifetime or in our own day.

In Mark’s Gospel, which we have been hearing and will continue to hear on most Sundays throughout this year, the opposition to Jesus starts building already at the very beginning of the second chapter, where his telling the paralytic that his sins are forgiven elicits the charge from some of the scribes that he was blaspheming, the very same charge that the high

priest made in the reading we just heard: “What further need have we of witnesses? You have heard the blasphemy.” In our own time, the charges are generally of a somewhat different sort: not that Jesus himself was guilty of claiming to be divine but that his followers have been misguided in making that claim. Without much difficulty, one can find comments in magazine articles or on television and other visual media that mock Christian belief. This means that we, just like the first disciples and also like all Christians who will follow us down the ages, are faced with the very same question that Jesus asked at Caesarea Philippi: “But who do *you* say that I am?” And when we answer as did St. Peter, “You are the Messiah,” that is, the Christ, the anointed one of God, we must also humbly acknowledge that we do not and cannot fully comprehend just what that means. Perhaps the closest we can come is to recall what St. John tells us in his first letter, that God is love, and that we see in the life and teaching of Jesus that love personified: not a love that is sentimental or wishy-washy, lacking in character or strength, but one that not only consoles those who are sorrowing but also confronts those who are self-righteous or greedy or hypocritical, just as God confronted all the evil-doers of ancient Israel through the words of prophets like Isaiah and Amos and Micah.

For us, even as for the first Christians in Judea and Galilee, it comes down to beholding in Jesus someone like God in human form, which is what lies behind the lyric cry of the early Church: “We have seen his glory, . . . full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14). As we continue this morning’s celebration of the Eucharist, let us not forget that there are many, very many of our fellow Christians in other parts of the world facing severe persecution and death for this faith, some of them, including young boys, even undergoing crucifixion just like their Master. May they be strengthened to hold firm to their faith, and may we, in far less difficult circumstances,

live more and more in such a way that our very lives will give witness to what the Roman centurion said as Jesus breathed his last: “Truly this man was the Son of God.”