

+ The liturgy of the palms, as well as the Passion narrative, not to mention the Christ-hymn from Philippians—all these would seem more than enough material from which to make a homily. In fact, it's almost too much. So, I've elected to do something a little different this Sunday. Last year, I focused on the Triumphal Entry of Christ in to Jerusalem, and its remarkable difference from worldly triumph. But this year, I've elected instead to take a broader, more big-picture view of the Holy Week that lies ahead of us. I think the Scriptures for today actually encourage us to do so—framing the whole week, or at least from Palm Sunday to Good Friday, with triumphant entrance, and with the crucifixion. So let's consider, very briefly, what it is that we are now about.

I believe it was the novelist, William Faulkner, who once observed: “The past is not dead—it is not even past.” If this is true, even in some mundane sense, it is much more so when applied to the truths of our faith. The Christian religion is based on two fundamental assumptions about the nature of reality—first, that God is active in history, that his ongoing work of creation involves direct and personal intervention. This is a mysterious thing—that the finite cosmos can serve as the stage for Divine action, that the limited is a vessel for the boundless. This possibility underlies the mystery of the Incarnation itself, the highest divine act, whereby God and Man are joined forever. The second assumption, unstated but implicit throughout the whole Biblical revelation, is that these Divine acts have permanent and ongoing effects, transcending times. When God enters into the present, His actions not only work in the moment, but across all times, changing the meaning of the past, wholly transforming the now, directing the course of things to come. Our celebration of Holy Week, which we begin today, is our recognition, through our worship together, that the events of Christ's Passion have a continual bearing on our lives, singly and corporately.

How this should be so is itself mysterious. I am afraid that, for lack of sufficient reflection and meditation, we are too often content to reduce the effect of the Passion to a merely rational analysis. These events occurred—Christ was crucified, buried, and ascended—and they had such and such effects—an atonement for sins, a reconciliation between a righteous God and a fallen humanity, the beginning of a universal restoration. I do not by any means deny the validity of these truths. However, the very drama of our worship—like the procession of palms with which we opened the service this morning—invites us to something more experiential, more participatory, than mere theological reflection. We are being invited this week, as the collect for this Wednesday puts it, to “enter with joy upon the meditation of those mighty acts, whereby God hath given unto us life and immortality.” I contend that the shape of our liturgy this Holy Week is beckoning us to adopt a certain mindset—I will even be bold to characterize it as a “mystical” one. We are being asked to enter “Higher Time”—that spiritual place where past, present, and future meet as one—to accompany our Lord through the final week of His ministry, to realize, more and more, the ongoing effects of God's mighty acts in our lives today.

This is an exercise that requires both reverent imagination and acute self-awareness. We are to imagine ourselves present in Jerusalem with Christ, in His words and deeds among the people, in the company of His disciples, before king and governor, in the garden, on the cross, without the tomb on Easter morning. But this is not simply an exercise in historical imagination—we are also to consider what these events and realities mean for us—to what are they calling us—both as individuals and a community of faith.

This morning, I'd like only to sketch out the contours of this journey through Passion Week, to put into our minds four "stops" or "exhibits" if you will, in this mystical museum of faith. Let us stand first at the gates of Jerusalem. Then, in the temple courts. Afterwards, let us gather in the upper room. Finally, we will stand in the place of the skull. There are other places we might visit, scenes on which we could and should meditate this week, but I choose these only by way of demonstration.

We have already participated in a liturgical way in that triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. If we will stand now at her gates in spirit, what do we see? A man enters an ancient city, acclaimed as king, a conqueror without an army. What is Jerusalem? Historically, it is both the dwelling-place of God in His temple, the city of David's throne, and also the murderess of the prophets, that unfaithful bride and spouse of God. Caesar rules it now, and her streets are thronged with both the expectant and the discontented. The temple is here, but also prisons where thieves are held in chains, doomed to execution. There are barracks for the iron-clad cruelties of Rome. There are back rooms where conspirators are plotting betrayal and death. So much for the Jerusalem of history. Where does our Savior enter in today? Into Jerusalem, i.e., into all the maddening complexity, the good intermixed with the perverse, of the totality of human life. He still rides on, unarmed but with the Word of God. In what spirit do we receive Him? We proclaim him as king, but do we understand His kingdom? In what way do we, who now shout glad Sunday Hosannas, turn about so soon to bray, on Friday, "crucify Him; we have no king but Caesar."

Unarmed, we said, but if we go now to the temple mount we will find Him wielding a whip of cords, driving out those who sell, and overturning the tables of the money-changers. Christ comes to purify the dwelling-place of God with His people, to turn it once more into a house of prayer where it had been made a den of thieves. We know that this act is highly symbolic, and that in His own preaching Jesus makes continual connections between himself and the temple. He is Himself the dwelling-place of God with His people, and in Him the unity of God and Man effectually purifies humanity. Does he do a similar work in us? If we have received of his spirit, do we allow Him to drive out what is out-of-place, what is inappropriate, what is sinful in us? For he comes not to bring peace, but a sword, and to cast a fire on earth. He comes not that we may make peace with our sins, but that He may destroy them.

Let us gather with Him in the Upper Room, to celebrate that final Passover. We see Christ washing the feet of His disciples, delivering unto them that New Commandment: "Love one another." We eat of that bread, and drink of that cup, which is the New Covenant in His body and His blood. We see the confusion, the controversy, the encroaching sense of dread. Judas goes out to do his work. Peter makes foolhardy professions of loyalty and perseverance. The Upper Room is that place of calm before the storm, a place of refreshment before arrest and trial. We gather there together at every mass, as we do today. Let us take care, while He is with us in this place of calm, to receive of that food and drink with which we may be strengthened for the trial that is coming.

For the trial will come. Our faith does not trivialize suffering, nor does it promise an escape from it. We know that if we will be as our Master, we must also carry our cross. The glory of the Resurrection does not subtract from the reality of that suffering. The way to Resurrection, to immortality, is won by the real suffering of the most innocent Man who has ever lived. And we must gather on Calvary's hill, in the place of the skull, to look this tragedy, this

crime full in the face. For to look at the wreckage of the flesh of God the Son is to understand that which is monstrous and destructive in ourselves, to admit the fullness of our rebellion, and to hear nevertheless these shocking speeches, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do,” and “Today you will be with me in Paradise.”

These are only broad outlines of the mystical journey we have to walk this week. For each of us, as we attend to the scriptures read in our worship together, new and perhaps highly personal applications of these mighty acts may occur in your own meditation. In fact, this cannot but be the case, as the Holy Spirit within each of us makes intercession to God, bringing to each that measure of wisdom that is lacking for the maturity of our faith. If you are unable to attend the services this week on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, and even if you are able, I strongly suggest that you pray the Daily Offices for Holy Week on your own, or as a family. If this is not possible, then read Matthew chapters 21-28, interspersed throughout the week. Let us resolve together to open our minds and our hearts, to follow after Christ this Holy week in our mind's eye and in our openness to the Spirit, asking our Father to conform us more and more to the image of Son. We will walk this journey with Him, because we know, through Him, that it leads to everlasting life. + Amen.