

Homily for Palm Sunday

Psalm 118: 1-2, 19-end, Mark 11:1-11



When you hear the word palm I'm sure all of you here immediately think of palm crosses especially today when earlier we were all given our palm crosses as a physical reminder of that day some two thousand years ago when Jesus rode triumphally into Jerusalem The day when the crowds rushed out to fete him and tore down great palm branches to act as a carpet over which he could ride on that oh so humble donkey. But I'm sure if you asked most people in the street what the word palm would conjure up they would talk of exotic holidays spent on sun kissed tropical beaches fronting an azure blue sea and with a backdrop of palms gently swaying in the breeze. In fact, sad to say I rather doubt if the majority of the population would even know what a palm cross was let alone what it symbolizes which surely has to be another indictment of our secular age.

And there is one other very different meaning of the word palm namely with respect to the palms of our hands. Palms that are all unique, criss-crossed and furrowed with a multitude of lines which some like to claim can show us the future but as we age are far more likely to confirm that we are just becoming ever more wrinkled and lined.

Using that generally to be trusted and invaluable search engine Google I find that originating from the ancient near East and Mediterranean world palm branches have been seen as symbols of resolution overcoming calamity, of victory, triumph, peace and eternal life all of which are so significant as we look at the events of Palm Sunday. Palm branches were awarded to victorious athletes in ancient Greece and in ancient Rome the palm frond was seen as victory personified and hence of peace since victory was assumed to realise that elusive quality. Interestingly in Assyrian religious practices the palm tree itself was identified as a sacred tree with the crown of the tree symbolizing heaven and the base of the trunk earth. Also, and I find interestingly, way back in time it was claimed by Orientals that the palm sprung from the residue of the clay from which Adam was formed.

And of course, when we look at the observance by the Jews of the festival of Sukkoth, the Festival of the Tabernacle or Booths we find that the worshippers processed to Jerusalem and into the Temple waving in their right hands a 'lulab' which was a bunch of leafy branches of either myrtle, willow or palm. As they waved their lulabs they recited words from psalm 118: we heard read this morning 'Save us we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you give us success.' followed by the words: 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.' And all of you who know your Hebrew will recognise that the word Hosanna means 'Save us'.

So, with all this background the events of Jesus's triumphant ride into Jerusalem begin to make all sorts of connections with Jewish practices and with the symbolism of palm branches. Jesus, riding not on some magnificent horse as Roman generals might ride in their victory parades but on that most humble of animals a donkey, a beast of burden and yet an animal who bears upon its back a cross, a very marked and distinctive cross. To some it must have seemed a ridiculous sight as Jesus's sat erect as any king but with his sandalled feet almost touching the ground; was he merely some sort of clown. A figure to be mocked and ridiculed or casually dismissed as some sort of eccentric or worse an imbecile? But no for most people there that day he was not a figure of ridicule to be laughed at and dismissed but a figure who surely carried all their hopes, their dreams for a better future. A future which would see their Messiah saving them from the hated and feared rule of their Roman overlords and bring them a triumphal victory and peace., and for the more far sighted the promise of eternal life. Aren't these the dreams of people down the ages who know the weight of oppression and lack of freedom that a heroic saviour will come and release them from their bondage. Isn't that what the people of the Gaza the people of Ukraine, of the Yemen the Congo, Eritrea and Sudan dream of as the ever more deadlier weapons of destruction echo around them and the abhorrent cruelties of war are daily inflicted upon them. 'Save us we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you give us success.'

Seeing in the person of Jesus a Saviour, a Messiah, is it any wonder that they laid out a red carpet for him albeit not made of plush Wilton but of their own humble cloaks and the torn down palm branches. Again, some would have ridiculed such a homespun procession but for those who later reflected on these events surely, they must have understood that here was a Saviour with his feet both literally and metaphorically on the ground; here was a Saviour who walked with the humble and meek; here was a Saviour whose victory was not of this world but of God's. Here was a Saviour whose victory was in a sense brought about by allowing himself in all humility to be 'palmed off' with the sins of the world and through God's grace transform them into the blessed gifts of forgiveness and redemption for all God's children Here was a saviour whose peace was truly the peace of God beyond all understanding.

And perhaps as they meditated on these things they looked down at the palms of their hands and imagined the palms of Jesus cruelly scarred by those iron nails which were meant to put an end to all hopes of victory, of triumph, of peace and eternal life and which failed utterly in their task. Those scarred palms which reach out now to us to bring us the gospel of Christ in which we can discern God's will for us His children that we should be saved from the bondage of sin and shame and redeemed through Christ's sacrificial love.

Ride on, ride on in majesty! Hark, all the tribes hosanna cry; they humble beast pursues his road with palms and scattered garments strewed.

Ride on, ride on in Majesty! In lowly pomp ride on to die; O Christ, thy triumph now begin o'er captive death and conquered sin.

Ride on, ride on in majesty! Thy last and fiercest strife is nigh; the Father on his sapphire throne, awaits his own anointed Son.

Ride on, ride on in majesty! In lowly pomp ride on to die; bow thy meek head to mortal pain, the take, O God, thy pow'r and reign.