

Homily for Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion, Year (B)

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by

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Homily Reflections

Many years ago I was standing in a reception line at a fundraising event. Near me was a young man in his early teens who has spina bifida. He could only stand supported by braces that he held with both hands. A woman seeking to express great kindness said to him, "My what a brave young man you are." To this he replied, "Lady, everybody has a cross to bear. You can just see mine."

At a certain point when the line began to thin out I reminded my young friend of his response. A big smile came over his face as he said to me: "It's true you know. Everybody has a cross. I read about yours in the morning newspaper."

Faith, faith provides us the prism through which to see reality and the unfolding of our daily life, what Catholics used to call the prism, the eye of faith. Through faith we see that God's plan, Christ's love and the power of the Holy Spirit are part of who we are, how we're

supposed to act and react to the living out of our human condition, how we live out our life.

Holy Week is a time the Church sets aside each year so that we can experience in the liturgy the events of our salvation, renew our faith, strengthen our spiritual life and give strength to that vision of life that only our faith can provide us. And, as we make our faith journey we recognize that it is through the eyes of faith that we see so much more of what God intends for us. Palm Sunday calls us to begin this spiritual journey. It helps us approach the mysteries of salvation with lively faith and grow that much closer to Christ.

The reading for the Blessing of Palms sets the stage for our spiritual journey. With the eyes of faith we can truly grasp what is unfolding as Jesus completes His three-year public life, as he comes now to this final stage for the last time to the gates of Jerusalem.

To the crowds who lined the streets, and to His own disciples, this was a triumphant moment. Jesus enters Jerusalem and is hailed by many as the king—the long-awaited messiah, the one who would come in the name of the Lord and re-establish the Kingdom of David.

It is only in the painful sequence of events during this week that the true nature of Jesus' kingdom and our part in it become clear. His is a kingdom of the Spirit. We will be invited to take up the cross as he did. We will be encouraged to see in our own limitations, suffering, pain and even death a new fuller, richer meaning. Jesus will hold out for all of us the revelation of the transforming power of love. So great is His love for us and His Father that he will freely take up the cross, suffer and die on it for us, for our salvation.

Christ holds up for us the cross with this understanding: If we embrace it with love, as he did, the cross can be redemptive. Into every life comes a cross. There's no way to avoid the cross that each of us must carry. Some are simply "more visible" than others. Yet no one escapes the ups and downs of the human condition. Sometimes the cross comes in the form of aging, physical suffering, disease, disability. Other times it presents itself as a betrayal of a friendship, an abuse of a relationship. Our cross might simply be the struggle to live out the wondrous yet demanding promises to love, honor and support one another "all the days of our lives." Whatever the cross,

Jesus tells us we must take it up. We must carry it. We must pick up our cross and walk with him.

Jesus embraced the cross, and in His great love he transformed it into an instrument of God's grace and instrument of God's power, an instrument of the Spirit. So too can we. We are able to unite our personal cross to the cross of Christ and, in our love, transform it and make it into something just as Jesus did. Make it into something redemptive, transforming, life-giving.

In one of the most familiar and probably most cherished forms of the Way of the Cross, we find this invitation to prayer: "We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you." To which we reply: "Because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world." In this brief prayer Saint Alphonsus Liguori captured the essence of that ancient creedal proclamation Jesus Christ "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried." All of this for a purpose. "We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world."

There is much more to the statement of faith than the simple recognition that Christ died. If Christ had not redeemed us by his cross, His death would have had little or

no meaning, certainly for us today. With eyes of faith, the apostles and all believers after them gaze on the cross and see much more than just the instrument on which Jesus hung until he died. The death of Jesus is a historical and theological reality that can be interpreted correctly only with eyes of faith.

Toward the end of Mark's Gospel, as Jesus takes His last breath, the eyes of the Roman centurion are opened and he recognizes the meaning of what is happening, of what he has just witnessed of what he's been a part of. And he says: "Truly this man was the Son of God!" (Mk 15.39). Later, in explaining more profoundly the theological significance of Jesus' death, St. Paul points out that "just as through one transgression condemnation came upon all, so through one righteous act acquittal and life comes to all" (Rom. 5.18).

Jesus' saving actions are the work of a person who is both God and man. They have, therefore, superabundant value. Jesus Christ is the only one who could offer the Father a fitting atonement for sin. It is here that we see the immensity of God's saving mercy. Not only does God save us, but he also brings about salvation in a generous way and in a manner that honors the humanity he saves. In Christ, God allows a human being to bring him gifts worthy of salvation.

Jesus took on human suffering, pain, loss, fear, anxiety, diminishment and even death. Through the power of His love he transformed all of these harsh realities into means of grace. And, by the blood of the cross he won for us our salvation. In so doing, he invites us to transform our own sufferings, our own limitations, disabilities and distress into a sharing in His own redemptive love.

How is it that we will have the spiritual power, the power, the grace of God to make this spiritual journey through life, to take up our cross and carry it, to transform the events of our lives through God's love? The answer is in the great gift Jesus left us at the Last Supper.

In the Eucharist, Jesus has instituted the sacrament in which the very passion, death and resurrection that he would undergo would be made present again in our lives. This presence enables us to share in the benefits of the cross. We speak of our dying to sin and rising to new life because we participate in the mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection.

With lively faith, then, let us approach this Holy Week with the recognition that the cross each one of us

bears can be a real and true gift. To the extent that we see with the eyes of faith, we allow ourselves to enter that world of redeeming love and embracing grace. This is the world that Jesus proclaimed as he entered Jerusalem in triumph on Palm Sunday, fully aware that this was the prelude to both his death and his glorious resurrection.