

Palm Sunday – March 16, 2008

Based on Matthew 21:1-11.

HOSANNA in the Highest!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Hosanna in the Highest!

These are the words that the crowds shouted as Jesus rode into Jerusalem. The term Hosanna was originally two words that meant save us, we pray. It comes from Psalm 118 in the Jewish scripture and is a song of thanksgiving. And as such it was probably sung as an expression of confidence in the Lord, praising and thanking God for the help that was given in a time of distress.

So why were the people shouting or singing this term in relation to Jesus?

Matthew places the starting point for Jesus' journey into Jerusalem from the Mt. of Olives. According to the OT prophesy of Zechariah, that on the day of the Lord important events are to begin at this spot. The passage from Zechariah is an oracle that announces the coming judgment against Israel's enemies. The king who enters Jerusalem will not be a military ruler, but rather a humble leader riding on a donkey.

The thought of riding on a donkey may seem strange to people in Western cultures, but ancient leaders and kings rode on donkeys and mules.

The people in Israel were living under occupation. There was a Roman army stationed in Palestine and a large contingent of that military force was in Jerusalem for this Jewish Passover celebration to handle any potential unrest or rebellion against Roman rule. This is much like the Israelis in the Gaza Strip today oppressing the Palestinians or the U.S. military occupying Bagdad. The native peoples want to be free from foreign rule and have their country back under their control.

The people were waiting for such a leader to oust the foreigners, and save the people from occupation and oppression. Many saw Jesus as that leader. A king sent by God to save the people from the economic and physical suffering imposed by the ruling foreign powers.

Jesus, however, is treated as a symbolic, humble king in the line of David rather than as a warrior king who will restore Israel by the sword. He rides in on a donkey and the people put cloaks and palm branches before him.

I was wondering why today is called Palm Sunday? Why not call it "Cloak" Sunday, or "Donkey" Sunday?

I suspect that the symbolism of Palm branches is lost on us today. Most of us don't see these trees or have any contact or connection to them, except maybe when we go on

vacation to a more exotic place. But in Jesus' time, Palm trees were associated with oasis, water and life. The palm tree is especially hardy in arid climates because it has deep roots which seek out low water tables. This allows it to live a long time and bear fruit for many years. In addition, the tall, upright and stately form of the tree suggests justice and nobility. The leaves were also used for decoration in homes and in Solomon's temple.

Palms were not only symbolic, but extremely practical and necessary for everyday life and sustenance. Not only were the dates eaten, but many other parts of the tree were used as well. The sap was turned into a fermented, alcoholic drink and the leaves were used as roofing for houses and for weaving into baskets and mats that were used for sitting and sleeping on.

The Israelites used the every day stuff of life to place before the long hoped for king – the one who is coming to save us from our enemies and liberate us from our oppression. These people trusted so much that they placed the basic elements – palm leaves – that were used to make some of the essentials of their lives, before Jesus on his triumphal ride into Jerusalem. These were the leaves that held their bedroom secrets, as well as their hopes and fears: the leaves that created a roof to keep them protected and covered from the elements; the leaves also made important implements for commerce to hold goods and carry their possessions. These palm leaves became the intimate, sacred symbol of their life and were laid before Jesus to honor him as king. They trusted in him and believed that he would save them from the ills of this world.

How do we bring all of these things and place them before Jesus today?

We wouldn't put our beds, the fruit we eat, our favorite drink, chunks of our roof or our storage bins before him. No, we are called to hold up the people, things and issues that stand for justice and life in our world – just like the palm tree symbolized life, abundance and justice for the Hebrews. In our day it may be things like education, health care, equal marriage, respect and care for the creation, or to speak out against the injustices of the world – poverty, violence, state authorized torture, political and physical terrorism or the abuse of power and resources. The list could go on and on.

It starts with personal awareness. How much do I take my home for granted? What about my health insurance? The food I eat, the education I have or the education that my children are receiving? The physical or material safety that I have? Aren't all these things the stuff of our lives that we need? These, then, become like the palm leaves for our ancestors of faith. We too, can place our modern day palm leaves at the service of Jesus as we acknowledge the importance of these things and commit ourselves to work for a more just society so that all people may have these things of life.

And just like the crowds in Matthew's Gospel, we are not alone in bringing these items to the one who saves us. We do so in the company of each other. My one palm branch may seem miniscule and insignificant, but if we combine all of our branches and place them in front of us, we will have a new road, a new path on which to journey.

The dynamics in our current world – violence, military occupation, economic inequality, marginalization, poverty and suffering were the same issues that the Jews in Jesus' day had to deal with. They believed that Jesus could and would save them from the injustices in the world and usher in a new era of God's love that would embrace them. I believe that Jesus' mission and teachings are still valid for us in our struggles today.

Therefore, let us proclaim boldly the words that our Jewish fore bearers sang about Jesus –

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