

April 5, 2020

St. Augustine Cathedral

10:00 a.m. (LiveStream)

Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion

As the saying goes: The more things change, the more they stay the same. In this unprecedented time in which everything around us has changed, what remains the same is: this is Palm Sunday, and the beginning of Holy Week.

That being said, this is a Palm Sunday like none of us have ever experienced; and we are beginning a Holy Week unlike any in the long history of the Church.

Just a month ago, most of our lives were still normal; three weeks ago, we were still able to come together for Mass. But for the better part of these last two weeks, we are under government restrictions to “stay home/stay safe”; interstate travel is prohibited; and many parts of the country have ordered people to wear face masks if anyone dares to venture out of their homes.

We've gone from a free and socially engaged life, to quarantines, isolation, and mandated social distancing.

In many ways, as the Readings and the Proclamation of the Passion Account on this Palm Sunday remind us, that's exactly what happened to Jesus.

Jesus enters into Jerusalem, riding on a donkey (like a King), and having crowds of people waving palm branches and shouting accolades: *“Hosanna to the Son of David; Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!”* As we heard at the end of that Gospel reading, all the people were asking---“*Who is this?*”--- And the answer was: *“This is Jesus, the prophet!”*

But, then the world changed, almost overnight. “What was up was down; what was down was up.” (“Alice in Wonderland”)

The King became a Criminal; plots were hatched to arrest Him; money was paid to have one of His own betray Him; armed soldiers came to arrest, torture and scourge Him.

His fans became His foes; the accolades turned into accusations; and instead of riding gloriously on a beast of burden, Jesus became the One who carried the burden of the Cross to Calvary.

We always see this incredible turn of events every Palm Sunday, but perhaps it doesn't sink in; because we're in the midst of a “crazy nightmare” that makes us all wonder if we suddenly woke up in “Never Never Land”, maybe this year, all that Jesus faced might really register with us in this unprecedented Lent of 2020.

Life can change in an instant. We have all probably experienced one, if not more, life-changing events. But for life as we know it to change “in an instant” for the entire world??? That’s hard to comprehend. As Archbishop Gomez, the Archbishop of Los Angeles and the President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops put it, “Future generations will look back on this Lent of 2020 as a time when disease and death suddenly darkened the whole earth.”

Perhaps over these couple weeks, we’ve put aside some of what we thought were such urgent political concerns, or celebrity events, or sports activities, and have come to remember and hold onto what is most important in our lives. Perhaps during these weeks we’ve found ourselves being more tuned into other’s suffering---more compassionate---more understanding that these restrictions are not just affecting us, but all people everywhere----that we really are all in this together.

We long for what we don’t have: a return to normalcy; a sense of security; we long for social interaction.

On a spiritual level, we can say the same thing: I’m sure we all long to be able to come together to celebrate our Faith, especially in this, the holiest week of

the Year; we long for the comfort of the Sacraments, and especially we long for the ability to receive Jesus in the Holy Eucharist.

Perhaps with this new sensitivity to what we, and all the world, are experiencing together, we can enter into the horror of what Jesus experienced for the salvation of the world, and the forgiveness of the sins of every human being who have ever lived or ever will live.

And maybe---just maybe---we'll be able to realize that what we celebrate this week is not just the story of a good Man or a great Prophet who was unjustly condemned to death, but then somehow came back to life. No, this is the account of the Son of God who willingly endured this incredible suffering and death out of Love for you, and for me, and for all the world, for all times. He suffered. He died. He was dead and buried. He didn't just come back to human life; He rose to New Life, thereby destroying the power of sin that grips the souls of every human being; He conquered the ultimate power of human death, and transformed it into the entry way into New Life with Jesus, which we will experience for all eternity.

A particular loss this year as we celebrate Palm Sunday is that you all won't have this blessed Palm to take into your homes. All our parishes here in our

Diocese will be holding onto the Palm that your priests are blessing today, and will distribute it to you when the restrictions have been lifted and we can come back together.

The Palm branches, whether you have them or not, remind us that just like the fickle, cheering crowds who waved them when Jesus came into Jerusalem but then turned on Him almost overnight, using those same palms to malign and taunt Jesus, so too do we find ourselves as fickle followers of Jesus in our own lives.

We began to follow Jesus on the day of our Baptism. We re-committed ourselves to following Jesus on the day of our Confirmation. We renew our Baptismal Promises of belief in Jesus every Easter, we profess our Faith in Jesus at every Sunday Mass.

We have the best of intentions of following Him faithfully; I'm sure that we want to be virtuous in our daily activities. But then....., we forget, or become distracted, or give into temptations and commit sins. Our own "cheers" turn to "jeers"; our efforts to be faith-filled become foiled by our fickle human nature.

So, while you don't get any new Palm today as a reminder of all of that, perhaps this world-wide health crisis can serve as the reminder of our fragile human nature that we all need. Life can change in an instant. And I hope that we realize that what is ultimately most important to us is to be sure that we are following Jesus as faithfully as we possibly can in spite of those human tendencies to be fickle, or to follow Him only when convenient.

Holy Week 2020 that begins today is as different as it can possibly be; but it remains as it always has been---the opportunity for us to re-live once again what Jesus endured for us; to follow after Jesus, thru the "*Hosannas*" of today, the blessing of the Holy Oils and Sacred Chrism on Holy Tuesday, the betrayal of Jesus on Spy Wednesday, the Gift of the Eucharist and our mandate to serve others that we celebrate on Holy Thursday, thru the horrors of Good Friday, and right into the Glorious Joy of Easter Sunday.

While the world is focused on disease and death, our Faith focuses our attention on the undeniable fact that Jesus, our Redeemer, lives. We realize again, but maybe for the first time, there can be no New Life without first dying to oneself; there is no Easter Sunday without Good Friday.

Yes, it's hard to comprehend how different this Holy Week is going to be. Our churches are closed. We are restricted and ordered to stay at home. We are unable to receive Jesus in the Eucharist. But Jesus is STILL with us. **He** is not quarantined. His Gospel is not restricted. His Word remains ever life-giving and always renewing. And our Faith in Him is what helps us to look beyond these days of disease and death and realize with confidence and Hope that our God prevails.

As St. Paul put it in today's Second Reading. *"Jesus emptied Himself....humbled Himself....became obedient even to death on a cross. And it was because of that that God greatly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the Name above every other Name. So that at the Name of Jesus, every knee should bend...and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father."*

On this Palm-less Palm Sunday, let our *Hosannas* consistently cry out; and let our Faith carry us thru this time of fear and darkness into the brilliant Light of Easter Joy.