

Homily: Palm Sunday/Holy Week 2020

We face a very different Palm Sunday and Holy Week this year, as the lockdown/lockout continues. This has never happened in any of our life-times, but throughout history it certainly has.

This week's Catholic Herald has a few articles on present and past plagues. In 16th century Milan, when St Charles Borromeo was Archbishop, at the height of the 1576 plague, the city imposed a near total quarantine, and the time limit was repeatedly extended. Nobody was really allowed out, so couldn't go to church, so St Charles had altars set up in the streets so that people could see Mass celebrated from their windows. We've seen how that might have worked in both Italy and Spain as singing and clapping from their balconies has been on our screens.

And in 1633, the village of Oberammergau vowed if the plague ceased they would perform a Passion Play every ten years in thanksgiving. This was due again this year, but I gather is now scheduled for 2022.

It was William Blake who said 'Man is made for joy and woe, and when this we rightly know, Thro' the world we rightly go'. And also 'Joy and woe are woven fine, a clothing for the soul divine.' I was reminded of that by Bishop Robert Barron (of Catholicism series) who writes "The whole point of the Christian life is to find joy, but the attainment of true joy comes, in a sinful world, at the cost of some suffering."

St Pope John Paul II reminded us in his wonderful Apostolic Letter 'At the beginning of The New Millennium (Novo Millenio Ineunte) in section II **A Face to Contemplate: a face of sorrow.**

Think on this Sunday, that face at the start of Palm Sunday's procession, when the crowds roared and cheered as Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey, which we are reminded of at every Mass as we sing, Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna. (Benedictus qui venit) Our glory, laud and honour, however soon changes, as it did in Jesus' day, to shouts of anger and crucify,

crucify. The Passion reading on both Palm Sunday and Good Friday need no comment, just a good silence as we take them in.

They are preceded by wonderful readings, on both days; a first reading from Isaiah, and on Palm Sunday a second reading from Philippians.

The first readings come from sections from Isaiah, known as “The Servant Songs.” There are four of these, and we have one, two and three on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday this week, Sundays is repeated on Wednesday, Good Friday is the fourth and final ‘Suffering Servant’ song.

These songs promise the restoration of Israel after Exile in Babylon (modern day Iraq) by a new exodus and journey through the wilderness. They would be led by a mysterious figure “the servant of the Lord” who is represented as a special agent of God’s redeeming plan.

In the first two Songs (Mon & Tues: chapters 42 & 49) the servant appears as a messenger of grace and salvation, bringing true justice, but remarkably meek and humble, and being called in the womb to speak for God. Then in today’s reading he speaks, revealing that his vocation will involve suffering, (ch. 50) and the fourth on Good Friday (ch. 53) which Christians have always read as referring prophetically to Christ. We know that from Acts 8 with Philip and the Ethiopian. Probably no part of the Old Testament is quoted more often in the New to illuminate the purpose of Christ’s suffering. St Paul professes that ‘Christ died for our sins *in accordance with the scriptures*.

Indeed Jesus himself explained the meaning of his life and death in the light of God’s suffering Servant, giving his life as a ransom for many. After his resurrection he gave this interpretation of the Scriptures to the disciples on the Emmaus road, and then to the apostles.

The Psalm today, with its response ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ Jesus quotes on the cross, and New Testament writers also referred to it because the sufferings it describes in verses 16-18 correspond so closely to details in the passion.

The 2nd reading is again a beautiful passage, which many think was a very early Christian hymn which St Paul is quoting to the Philippians, urging humility and charity towards each other, reflecting those seen in Christ Jesus, who humbled himself even to accepting death, death on the cross. It is a very early statement of the meaning of the Passion as a sacrifice freely offered by Christ to the Father in submission to his will, and shown to be accepted by the Father’s raising of Christ to glory, which you may recall is very much a theme drawn out by St John, and ‘Father glorify your Son.’

‘The name which is above all other names’ is ‘The LORD,’ previously belonging to God as He was known in the Old Testament: this means that the Father has made Jesus equal to himself, and has glorified us together with him.

If you have access to them, one or two hymns are worth reading ‘At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow,’ and ‘My song is love unknown., Many others for Passiontide are appropriate to feed our faith.

And of course the Sorrowful Mysteries of the Holy Rosary, and as you pray them, look on the sorrowful face in the garden, the face as Jesus is being scourged, the face crowned with thorns, and as he carries the cross, and the face that prays Father forgive them, the face turned to his mother ‘Behold your son’, and to the beloved disciple ‘Behold your mother.’ and the thirst for our souls as the face cries out It is accomplished as he bows his head and gave up the spirit.

Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face.