



The Holy See

CELEBRATION OF PALM SUNDAY OF THE PASSION OF OUR LORD

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Saint Peter's Square
23rd World Youth Day
Sunday, 16 March 2008

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Year after year the Gospel passage for Palm Sunday recounts Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. Together with his disciples and an increasing multitude of pilgrims he went up from the plain of Galilee to the Holy City. The Evangelists have handed down to us three proclamations of Jesus concerning his Passion, like steps on his ascent, thereby mentioning at the same time the inner ascent that he was making on this pilgrimage. Jesus was going toward the temple - toward the place where God, as Deuteronomy says, had chosen to "make his name dwell" (cf. 12: 11; 14: 23). God who created heaven and earth gave himself a name, made himself invocable; indeed, he made himself almost tangible to human beings. No place can contain him, yet for this very reason he gave himself a place and a name so that he, the true God, might be personally venerated as God in our midst. We know from the account of the 12-year-old Jesus that he loved the temple as his Father's house, as his paternal home. He now visits this temple once again but his journey extends beyond it: the final destination of his climb is the Cross. It is the ascent described in the *Letter to the Hebrews* as the ascent towards the tent not pitched by human hands but by the Lord, which leads to God's presence. The final climb to the sight of God passes through the Cross. It is the ascent toward "love to the end" (cf. Jn 13: 1), which is God's true mountain, the definitive place of contact between God and man.

During his entry into Jerusalem, the people paid homage to Jesus as the Son of David with the words of the pilgrims of Psalm 118[117]: "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" (Mt 21: 9). He then arrived at the temple. There, however, in the place that should have been taken up by the encounter between God and man, he

found livestock merchants and money-changers who occupied this place of prayer with their commerce. Certainly, the animals on sale were destined to be burned as sacrifices in the temple, and since in the temple it was impossible to use coins that bore the likeness of the Roman emperors, who were in opposition to the true God, they had to be exchanged for coins that did not show the idolatrous image. All this, however, could have taken place elsewhere: the place where this was now occurring should have been, in accordance with its destined purpose, the atrium of pagans. Indeed, the God of Israel was precisely the one God of all peoples. And although pagans did not enter, so to speak, into the Revelation, they could however, in the atrium of faith, join in the prayer to the one God. The God of Israel, the God of all people, had always been awaiting their prayers too, their seeking, their invocations. Instead, commerce was prevailing - dealings legalized by the competent authority which, in its turn, profited from the merchants' earnings. The merchants acted correctly, complying with the law in force, but the law itself was corrupt. "Covetousness... is idolatry", the *Letter to the Colossians* says (3: 5). This was the idolatry Jesus came up against in the face of which he cites Isaiah: "My house shall be called a house of prayer" (Mt 21: 13; cf. Is 56: 7), and Jeremiah: "But you make it a den of robbers" (Mt 21: 13; cf. Jer 7: 11). Against the wrongly interpreted order, Jesus with his prophetic gesture defends the true order which is found in the Law and the Prophets.

Today, all this must give us, as Christians, food for thought. Is our faith sufficiently pure and open so that starting from it "pagans", the people today who are seeking and who have their questions, can intuit the light of the one God, associate themselves in the atriums of faith with our prayers and, with their questions, perhaps also become worshippers? Does the awareness that greed is idolatry enter our heart too and the praxis of our life? Do we not perhaps in various ways let idols enter even the world of our faith? Are we disposed to let ourselves be ceaselessly purified by the Lord, letting him expel from us and the Church all that is contrary to him?

In the temple's purification, however, it was a matter of more than fighting abuses. A new time in history was foretold. What Jesus had announced to the Samaritan woman concerning her question about true worship is now beginning: "The hour is coming, and now is, when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him" (Jn 4: 23). The time when animals were sacrificed to God was over. Animal sacrifices were only a substitute, a nostalgic gesture for the true way to worship God. The *Letter to the Hebrews* on the life and work of Jesus uses a sentence from Psalm 40[39]: "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me" (Heb 10: 5). Christ's body, Christ himself, enters to take the place of bloody sacrifices and food offerings. Only "love to the end", only love for human beings given totally to God is true worship, true sacrifice. Worshipping in spirit and truth means adoring in communion with the One who is Truth; adoring in communion with his Body, in which the Holy Spirit reunites us.

The Evangelists tell us that in Jesus' trial false witnesses were produced who asserted that Jesus had said: "I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days" (Mt 26: 61). In

front of Christ hanging on the Cross some people, taunting him, referred to these same words: "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself!" (Mt 27: 40). The correct version of these words as Jesus spoke them has been passed on to us by John in his account of the purification of the temple. In response to the request for a sign by which Jesus could justify himself for such an action, the Lord replied: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (Jn 2: 18ff.). John adds that, thinking back to this event of the Resurrection, the disciples realized that Jesus had been referring to the Temple of his Body (cf. 2: 21ff.). It is not Jesus who destroys the temple; it is left to destruction by the attitude of those who transformed it from being a place for the encounter of all peoples with God into a "den of robbers", a haven for their dealings. But as always, beginning with Adam's fall, human failure becomes the opportunity for us to be even more committed to love of God. The time of the temple built of stone, the time of animal sacrifices, is now passed: the fact that the Lord now expels the merchants does not only prevent an abuse but points to God's new way of acting. The new Temple is formed: Jesus Christ himself, in whom God's love descends upon human beings. He, by his life, is the new and living Temple. He who passed through the Cross and was raised is the living space of spirit and life in which the correct form of worship is made. Thus, the purification of the temple, as the culmination of Jesus' solemn entry into Jerusalem, is at the same time the sign of the impending ruin of the edifice and the promise of the new Temple; a promise of the kingdom of reconciliation and love which, in communion with Christ, is established beyond any boundary.

St Matthew, whose Gospel we are hearing this year, mentions at the end of the account of Palm Sunday, after the purification of the temple, two further, small events that once again have a prophetic character and once again make clear to us Jesus' true will. Immediately after Jesus' words on the house of prayer for all the people, the Evangelist continues: "And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them". In addition, Matthew tells us that children cried out in the temple the acclamation of the pilgrims at the city gates: "Hosanna to the Son of David" (Mt 21: 14ff.). Jesus counters the animal trade and fiscal affairs with his healing goodness. This is the temple's true purification. He does not come as a destroyer; he does not come with the revolutionary's sword. He comes with the gift of healing. He dedicates himself to those who, because of their ailments, were driven to the end of their life and to the margins of society. Jesus shows God as the One who loves and his power as the power of love. Thus, he tells us what will always be part of the correct worship of God: healing, serving and the goodness that cures.

And then there are children who pay homage to Jesus as the Son of David and acclaim him the Hosanna. Jesus had said to his disciples that to enter the Kingdom of God it was essential to become once again like children. He himself, who embraces the whole world, made himself little in order to come to our aid, to draw us to God. In order to recognize God, we must give up the pride that dazzles us, that wants to drive us away from God as though God were our rival. To encounter God it is necessary to be able to see with the heart. We must learn to see with a child's heart, with a youthful heart not hampered by prejudices or blinded by interests. Thus, it is in the lowly who

have such free and open hearts and recognize Jesus, that the Church sees her own image, the image of believers of all ages.

Dear friends, let us join at this moment the procession of the young people of that time - a procession that winds through the whole of history. Together with young people across the world let us go forth to meet Jesus. Let us allow ourselves to be guided toward God by him, to learn from God himself the right way to be human beings. Let us thank God with him because with Jesus, Son of David, he has given us a space of peace and reconciliation that embraces the world with the Holy Eucharist. Let us pray to him that we too may become, with him and starting from him, messengers of his peace, adorers in spirit and truth, so that his Kingdom may increase in us and around us. Amen.

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