



The Holy See

PALM SUNDAY

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

8 April 1979

1. During next week, the liturgy wishes to be strictly obedient to the succession of events. Precisely the events which took place in Jerusalem nearly two thousand years ago decide that this is Holy Week, the Week of the Lord's Passion.

This Sunday remains closely linked with the event that took place when Jesus approached Jerusalem in order to carry out there everything that had been announced by the prophets. Just on this day the disciples, by order of the Master, brought a donkey to him, after having asked to borrow it for a certain time. And Jesus sat upon it, in order that also that detail of the prophetic writings should be accomplished in him. In fact, the prophet Zechariah says:

"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!

Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!

Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass" (9:9).

Then also the people who were going to Jerusalem on the occasion of the feast days—the people who looked at the acts carried out by Jesus and listened to his words—manifesting the messianic faith that he had aroused, shouted: "Hosanna! Blessed be he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed be the kingdom of our father David that is coming! Hosanna in the highest! (Mk 11:9-10).

We repeat these words at every Mass when the moment of transubstantiation approaches.

2. In this way, then, on the way to the Holy City, near the entrance to Jerusalem, a scene of stirring triumph rises up before us.

"And many spread their garments on the road, and others spread leafy branches which they had cut from the fields" (Mk 11:8).

The people of Israel look to Jesus with the eyes of their own history; this is the history that brought the elect people, through all the ways of their spirituality, their tradition, their worship, precisely towards the Messiah. At the same time this history is a difficult one. The reign of David represents the peak point of the prosperity and earthly glory of the people which, from the time of Abraham, had found again several times their covenant with God-Yahweh, but had also broken it more than once.

And now will they form this covenant definitively? Or will they, perhaps, lose again this thread of the vocation which has marked the meaning of their history from the beginning?

Jesus enters Jerusalem on the donkey lent to him. The crowd seems nearer to the fulfilment of the promise for which so many generations had lived. The shouts, "Hosanna... Blessed be he who comes in the name of the Lord!", seem to want to express the meeting, now near, of human hearts with the eternal Choice. In the midst of this joy which precedes the Passover solemnities, Jesus is meditative and silent. He is fully aware that that meeting of human hearts with the eternal Choice *will not take place by means of the "Hosannas", but by means of the cross.*

Before he came to Jerusalem, accompanied by the crowd of people from his region, pilgrims for the feasts of the Passover, another had introduced him and had defined his place in the midst of Israel. It was precisely John the Baptist at the Jordan. But when John had seen Jesus, who was wailing, he had not cried "Hosanna", but pointing at him had said: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (Jn 1:29).

Jesus hears the cry of the crowd on the day he enters Jerusalem, but his thought is fixed on John's words at the Jordan: "Behold him who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29).

3. Today we read the narration of the Passion of the Lord according to Mark. There is a complete description of the events which will follow one another in the course of this week. And it is, in a certain sense, the programme of the week.

We stop in absorption before this narration. It is difficult to know these events in a different way. Although we know them all by heart, we always listen to them again with the same absorption. I remember when I was still a young priest and was narrating the Passion of the Lord to children, with what attention they used to listen! This was always a catechesis completely different from others. The Church, therefore, does not stop re-reading the narration of the Passion of Christ—and she wishes this description to remain *in our consciences and in our hearts.*

In this week we are called to a special solidarity with Jesus Christ: "a man of sorrows" (Is 53:3).

4. And so together with the image of this Messiah, for whom the Israel of the Old Covenant was waiting, and whom, in fact, it now seemed to have almost reached with its own faith at the moment of the entrance into Jerusalem, today's liturgy *presents to us another image at the same time*. It is the image described by the Prophets, particularly Isaiah:

"I gave my back to the smiters... ..and I know that I shall not be put to shame" (Is 50:6).

Christ comes to Jerusalem in order that these words may be fulfilled in him, to realize the figure of the "Servant of Yahweh", by means of which the Prophet, eight centuries before, had revealed God's intention. The "Servant of Yahweh": the Messiah, the descendent of David but the one in whom the "Hosanna" of the people is accomplished, the one who undergoes the most terrible ordeal:

"Those who see me mock me... ..Let him deliver him, if he is his friend" (Ps 21:8-9).

On the contrary, the eternal plan of love was to be realized *not by means of "liberation" from infamy but just by means of obedience unto death*. And now it is no longer the prophet that is speaking, but the Apostle, Paul, in whom "the word of the cross" found a particular way. Paul, aware of the Mystery of the Redemption, bears witness to him who "though he was in the form of God... emptied himself, taking the form of a servant... humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2:6-8).

This is the true image of the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Son of God, the Servant of Yahweh. With this image Jesus entered Jerusalem, when the pilgrims, who were accompanying him along the way sang: "Hosanna". And they spread the garments and branches of trees on the road along which he was walking.

5. And today *we hold olive branches in our hands*. We know that these branches will then dry up. With their ashes we will sprinkle our heads, next year, to recall that the Son of God, becoming man, accepted human death in order to earn Life for us.

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