

PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORD'S PASSION

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Opening Doors to Jesus & with Jesus

A reflection inspired by a homily by St. Pope John Paul II

“Behold your Lord is coming to you, humble and mounted on an ass...”. Do we join the crowd which led Jesus into Jerusalem and shout out our own Hosannas? Do we bless the one who comes in the Lord’s Name? The liturgy of Palm Sunday is a kind of solemn entrance into Holy Week. Yet Holy Week itself is an entry into something greater. How are we to understand this?

Palm Sunday combines a welcoming of Jesus and a welcoming of Jesus into our most sacred place. This is a place more our own than Jerusalem. Yet there is more to this Sunday than the two welcomes just mentioned. We must admit that we not only have cried “Blessed is the One who comes” but also “crucify him”! We have to share a triumphal entry and a death on the cross. The first welcomes and opens doors. The second rejects and closes those doors. We have to accept the fact that we have done both these things, at one moment or other, because that prepares us to live fully the paschal mystery.

“Rejoice, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king comes to you.” Jesus came to the so-called “city of peace” and was welcomed by a great crowd. In a certain way this city can symbolize the human race and its ambivalent reaction to the coming of Christ. Today we want to belong to the crowd of welcomers. But if we welcome Jesus as our Lord then we must remember that he is Lord of truth, freedom, justice and love. We welcome him precisely as Lord insofar as we also welcome these realities with faith and joy, not just outside but inside ourselves.

If we know what we are doing we realize we are being called to work with Jesus, and one another, to build peace and justice and truth and love. That begins with our opening of ourselves to Jesus’ coming, and involves committing ourselves to work with him to build these realities within ourselves. This, at least, is the first step. But all are not ready to do this. So we have to be ready also to accompany Jesus to the cross.

Who can guide us as we too climb the hill of Calvary with our Divine and Human Teacher? There is no better guide than Mary. What she teaches is part of the gift we receive when in accepting her as our spiritual Mother. St. John has to open his home; we have to open ourselves, our most sacred inner place. We start by welcoming her but that will lead us to welcome others. Will we respond as generously as Mary to the Lord’s call? Will we persevere with joy and fidelity in the mission to others that this implies? Will we let Mary teach us this? O Mary, give us your eyes so that on the face of the crucified Jesus we may recognize that of the Risen One, the one who fears nothing when doing what the Heavenly Father has called him to be and do. Mary, help us to entrust ourselves to Jesus and so to the Heavenly Father. Teach us how to be faithful no matter what this may cost. The first lesson is that of standing at the cross and joining Jesus’ love and forgiveness. The second lesson is that of opening our heart to all those who need love and forgiveness. This is our path into Holy Week and it is the path of our entire life as we come from Holy Week into the rest of our lives.

All Our Hope Comes From Belonging to Christ

A reflection taken from a sermon by Gueric of Igny

We are solemnly observing the annual commemoration of our Lord's passion, crucifixion and resurrection. What can I speak of except of Jesus Christ, and him crucified? No message could be more saving and no topic for reflection could be more beneficial! We remember Jesus Crucified and it more sweetly stirs our hearts, and makes our lives more wholesome and tears sin up by the roots more effectively than anything else! How can this be?

St. Paul loved to speak of the "hidden wisdom" of God. But isn't the crucified Jesus the complete revelation of that wisdom? Yes, to those who are on the road to destruction the wisdom revealed in Christ's crucifixion may seem mere foolishness, yet it is the power of God and the wisdom of God to those who are on the way to salvation! This seems to me to be the highest and noblest philosophy and wisdom. In comparison with it all worldly and human wisdom is worth nothing.

Am I made perfect by my own achievements? Do I advance in wisdom on my own? No! I am wise only if I qualify as a true disciple of Jesus Crucified! Only by clinging to Jesus Christ am I anything! God has made Jesus Crucified our only wisdom, and our righteousness, and our holiness, and our freedom! How can it be that anyone who is nailed to a cross with Christ is thereby also shown to be altogether wise, righteous, holy and free?

We can answer this question by considering our hope. One who dies with Christ has the sure hope of being raised with Christ and raised above all that is of earth alone. Such a person seeks, and even understands, the things of heaven! Such a one is righteous because in that person sin has been killed. Thus such a one is no longer enslaved to sin and is holy. We are holy because we have offered ourselves to God as living sacrifices, consecrated and acceptable to God. We are able to do this because the Son of God has redeemed us. It is in the freedom of spirit Christ gives us that we can now boldly repeat the confident words: The prince of this world is on his way here but he has no claim on us!

Truly, every good thing comes to us through our bond with Christ Crucified. With our Crucified Lord there is mercy and fullness of redemption. We are now acquitted of anything of which the prince of this world might accuse us. The foundation of all our good is that we be of one mind with our Teacher and Savior. We are able to repeat with St. Paul: God forbid that I should boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ! If we are Christ's and crucified with Christ we have all good things besides! All good comes from belonging to Christ. We are Christ's and in Christ we have God and all God's gifts.

Standing Firm in the Love Christ Teaches

A reflection developed from a treatise by Aelred of Rievaulx

We are called to be perfect even as our Heavenly Father is perfect. That means we are called to be perfect in love, even as God is. There is no better or greater inspiration to love than the love of Jesus revealed to us from the cross. Jesus teaches us to love even our enemies and to love them as we love brothers and sisters. He teaches us how to stand firm in this love so that it may indeed be perfect love.

Jesus was the fairest of human beings, as Scripture says. Yet he offered his beautiful face to be spit on. He allowed the eyes whose glance rules the universe to be blindfolded. He bared his back to scourging. He submitted the head that strikes terror in the princes and powers of earth to being crowned with thorns. He gave himself up to mockery and insult. More, he held firm in his love for those who crucified him even on the cross—with its nails and lance and gall and vinegar. He held firm in gentleness and kindness and serenity.

It is all summed up by another Scripture: *“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and like a lamb before the shearers he was silent and did not open his mouth.”* But he was not only silent. He prayed a most wonderful prayer: *“Father, forgive them.”* It is a prayer filled with love and imperturbable calm.

By this prayer he embraced enemies with love. He says, *“Father, forgive them!”* That is indeed a prayer of gentleness and love but it was not enough! He has something more to add. *“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.”* He not only forgives but excuses.

Those who killed Christ were great sinners. Yes, but they had very little understanding. Jesus recognizes this when he prays: *“Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.”* They were nailing him to a cross but they did not know who they were nailing to the cross. Scripture says: *“If they had known, they would never have crucified the Lord of glory”*. So Jesus prays: *“Father, forgive them”*.

They think they are crucifying a lawbreaker, an impostor claiming to be God’s Son, one who leads people astray. God’s face was hidden from them and they did not recognize the Divine Glory. So *“Father, forgive them! They do not know what they are doing.”*

This is what it is like to love not only our brothers and sisters but even our enemies. We embrace them in genuine love even when they are doing us injury. What can prevent the fire of this Divine Love in us from being cooled by our experiences of being injured and hurt? We have to keep the eyes of our soul always fixed on Jesus. He holds firm and is immovable in perfect love. He is our beloved Lord and Savior. To whom shall we look to learn love if not to Christ crucified?

Betrayal and the Response of Love

A reflection based on a text by Carroll Stuhlmueller

Jesus was betrayed and by one whom he loved and he met that betrayal by loving more deeply. What does this teach us? We never prepare for betrayal, for instance by making a warning about probable infidelity a normal part of preparation for marriage. We do ordinarily warn people to expect frustration in relationships and maybe even failure, but not betrayal. Isn't frustration bad enough? People sometimes give up when they experience frustration. Suppose they have placed all their hopes in God and then none of the hopes is fulfilled. Some cease to believe in God or God's goodness and love but others see this as an inner cleansing, freeing them from false ideas about who God is and how God shows us love. What makes the difference?

Let's begin again and this time from the fact that betrayal can inflict the worst sorts of inner injuries. Some are hurt so deeply as to become incapable of reaching out to others or trusting anyone. Compare this with Jesus' response to Judas' betrayal. He knew beforehand of Judas' plan to betray him. Yet he celebrated the Passover meal with him, reached out in a common sign of love by offering a special morsel during the meal, and forced him to admit what he was planning to do so as to realize that Jesus did not cease to love him. In fact, Jesus did something quite similar with Peter, even telling him that once he had repented he should reach out to help his fellow apostles.

All this had to hurt Jesus tremendously. He didn't withdraw into himself. Even when he felt abandoned by the Heavenly Father he didn't cease trusting—in fact, he turned the sense of abandonment into a prayer to the very one who seemed to have abandoned him. Through all the degradations inflicted on him—through the blows and spittle and mockery and slander Jesus continued to love and forgive and sought to accept everything precisely as a way of loving and helping, and saving, others—ourselves included.

Parts of the Gospels seem to tell us that Jesus turned to Scripture and drew strength from the parts of Isaiah called the Songs of the Suffering Servant. They stated the hope that continued to be his through and in spite of everything! From Jesus' example we know that nothing outside of us can ever rob us of our dignity or even our inner peace and equilibrium. Of course, we can let go of those inner wonders but we don't have to. God's gift of goodness and beauty to us is made all the more evident by our silent strength and serene love, through whatever happens. We too can turn to the Scriptures for light and encouragement and examples. The Lord hears the poor, the oppressed, the downtrodden and the afflicted. There may be a test but there is also a promise of new life. Though we pray to be saved from "the test" every time we pray the Lord's prayer, Jesus' own prayer, we have Jesus' example to help us pass through that test unharmed, if or when it comes. Through the cross comes resurrection! What does the Lord know about us as he brings us to share in his Last Supper? How does he reach out to us to assure us of his love no matter what he knows we will do, even to betraying him! Trust in the Lord—no matter what!

Learning Why We Wash Each Other's Feet

A reflection drawn from texts by the Daughters of St. Paul

Throughout the Gospels Jesus shows us that fidelity to one's vocation is lived one moment at a time. Jesus lived fidelity in a continuous stream of actions proclaiming the Kingdom of God, healing those ill in mind or body, and forgiving sins and showing love and kindness. Now Jesus' final Passover is beginning. Pilgrims are streaming into Jerusalem, including Jesus and his closest disciples. Jesus knows what is coming: "My appointed time draws near", he tells them. He knows he faces betrayal, torture and death. What does he do? He goes on living his vocation of revealing the faithful love of God. At this moment it means celebrating the Passover meal.

For something like three years these followers have listened to Jesus and watched him, and experienced the startling things he did and said. Tonight, at this meal, Jesus does something that surprises them more than ever. There is no conversation as Jesus kneels and tenderly washes and dries their feet. Jesus has come uncomfortably close to them in a wholly unexpected way—as Peter's reaction testifies. What's more, or worse, he seems to say: Everything that has gone before this has been a preparation for my doing this. Knowledge, information, moral conversion—these were not enough. He got their undivided attention.

Imagine yourself washing the feet of family members, or friends or employees, or your employer, or you enemies! It is an uncomfortable thought, perhaps because the act is so intimate and physical. We often treat each other like salespersons in a shoe store. We help people but we rub our noses, sit as far back as we can and stay with the customers only as long as we have to. (And we hope they keep their socks on!) Instead of this, Jesus is calling us to relate to one another rather as does a hospice nurse who is washing a terminally ill patient. What tenderness, gentleness, and acceptance there is on the part of the nurse, and of the patient, in this acting out of vulnerability.

As Jesus knelt before his chosen ones he said by his action: I know you, I know all about you, and I love you. I will keep on loving you no matter what. It is difficult to "know" that Jesus can know us *and* keep on loving us without qualifications. It is even more difficult for us to know another knows us wholly and keep on loving that person, without putting up defensive barriers.

And Jesus goes on sustaining this prolonged personal contact with each of us in the Eucharist. The Eucharistic celebration, like the Last Supper Passover meal, is about familial and human things, essential things in very personal relationships. We are touched, held, washed by Jesus in very intimate ways. O Jesus, wash me from the leprosy of self-hate and self-doubt. Wash me again and again until I can love myself as you love me. You gave your life for me. When I receive you in the Eucharist don't let me be distracted by things that don't really count. Let me know how very close you are at this marvelous, precious moment. Break through my inner barriers with you love. Amen!

Jesus' Dying Becomes the Meaning of our Living

A reflection developed from texts by Hugo. Rahner & Carroll StuhlmueLLer

A liturgical community finds strength, dignity and even life in death. What seemed hideous and beyond redemption can be transformed into a source of beauty and hope and a kind of continuous call to heroic goodness. This is the case with Jesus' death, as Hugo Rahner shows us. Thus, the prophets saw the tree of life in the center of paradise as a symbol of Messianic salvation. The tree represents God's wisdom and the Book of Revelation uses it to speak of the fulfillment of God's promise of redemption by adding a new element. Those who eat of the tree have washed in the blood of the Lamb. Between the tree in paradise and the tree in the Kingdom of Heaven there is a third tree of life, the Cross. The three trees seemed to represent a single reality.

This reality is the center of world history. It rises from Golgotha to Heaven and embraces, temporally speaking, the entire cosmos. That is why it stands at the place where Adam was created and died and is buried. On the same day and at the same hour the First Adam died the Second Adam died. A legend declares that on his deathbed Adam sent a son to paradise to ask the angelic guardian for a fruit of immortality from the tree of life. But the angel gave him three seeds for Adam to eat. After death three trees grew from them, and one was cut down to make Jesus' cross, the new Tree of Life.

Everything is to find its meaning in terms of this Tree of Life symbolism as the source of true wisdom—not that which Eve sought in eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. All this keeps our liturgical community's attention on the way our sharing in Jesus' cross gives life positive meaning. We, as members of that community, unite in sorrowing over Jesus, our community's most beloved member and the tragic reality of his death from which life nevertheless springs. So we don't celebrate the Eucharist today but focus on what it calls us to remember. In the readings of our liturgy we think how Jesus gave his life to fulfill promises. Their further fulfillment is now entrusted to us, the ever living Body of Christ. We remember he is fully human and divine—those who arrested him fall to the ground before when he says "I am". Our obedience to the Heavenly Father springs from Jesus' and in it we love each other as he loves us.

We know we will be tempted as he was but the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit will guide us as they did Him in overcoming temptation and following Jesus' love for the Heavenly Father and his Body. We have so much support that there is no pain or loss we can't sustain! God speaks and touches us in the prayers and actions of our community's liturgy. Jesus is our Great High Priest, who has experienced all our weakness and pain and temptations. Our sorrow is gathered into prayer with Jesus to do the Heavenly Father's will. Our faith finds in all this the strength and perfection which gradually realizes for us eternal salvation.

Resurrection Means the Fullness of Joy

A reflection from a homily by Hippolytus of Rome

The holy rays of the light of Christ shine forth! The pure stars of the Spirit rise! The heavenly treasures of glory and divinity lie open. This splendor swallows up the darkness of the shadows of death! Life is offered to all! The whole world is offered glory. For those who believe in Christ a glorious day has dawned.

This is a day that goes on unfolding endlessly. It is the fulfillment of the Passover and a miracle of divine power. It is the true and final festival, the everlasting memorial, and the day upon which all are offered freedom from suffering and from death. Life comes from the tomb, healing from the wounds of Christ, resurrection replaces our fallen state and the ascension to heaven beckons us to rise up to the Father of Lights. God brings the incredible from the impossible to show that all is possible to those who believe.

To show that he had power over even death Christ exercised his royal authority to untie death's bonds. Even as he commanded "Lazarus, come out" and said "Arise my child" so he has put death completely to death in each of us. Death's power came from sin. Sin searched everywhere in Jesus' sinless self to find its accustomed foods—pride, disobedience, sensuality and all the things that nourish sin in us. In Jesus sin found nothing to feed on; it died from lack of nourishment. Death became its own death. This is what is now happening in us.

Many of the just have proclaimed this Good News. Many were awaiting the One who was to come. By his resurrection as firstborn from the dead they enter never ending life. To save all the members of the human family, whenever and wherever they live, Jesus dwelt three days in the earth and then burst forth. It was the faithful women who were the first to see him. They heard the holy words, "Women rejoice!" Sadness is swallowed up by the joy of the resurrection. We have heard those words too! We echo their joy!

O Heavenly bounty, spiritual feast, divine Passover, coming down from heaven to the earth and then ascending again into heaven! You are the light of the New Candles, the brightness of the virgins' lamps. Thanks to you the lamps of souls are filled with holy oil and can never be extinguished. The spiritual and divine fire of love burns in all of us, in body and in soul. The new life unfolds more and more in our lives!

O God and Lord! O spiritual and eternal Master! O Christ, Lord! We entreat you to extend your strong protecting hands over your holy Church, and over your holy people, forever devoted to you. Raise high in our defense the trophies of your triumph! Grant that we, like Moses, may sing out a great and joyful hymn of victory. Yours is the glory and the power throughout all the ages! Amen!