

Palm Sunday Homily by Msgr. James D. Watkins
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Allow me to first of all to greet all who join us today by way of Live-Stream of our liturgy of Palm Sunday here at St. Ann's Church in Washington, DC. As you all know, we have suspended the public celebration of Masses because of the serious concern for our health during this time of the coronavirus pandemic across the nation and so many parts of the world.

It is a strange time, a very weird time, for us who today on a Sunday and especially we enter into the holiest of weeks, refrain from the public celebration of our liturgical rites of worship. As we have been reflecting these last weeks together, our time away from the Lord at Mass is both very different and difficult spiritually. The 40 days of Lent in the desert has been extended for us. Lent doesn't seem to go away. Like a bad nightmare, we wonder when it will all go away and when, if ever, we can go back to business as usual. There are no quick answers. We wait, and we wait, and we wait.

And yet we hope that all of this will pass away in a few months, but who really knows. This is perhaps a unique experience for just about all of us. This is, no doubt, a most challenging time in every respect. Who of us would have ever imagined celebrating Holy Week and, in particular, next Sunday, Easter Sunday, watching a screen and tuning into the Mass by way of electronic technology.

Yet, that is where we are, and it's important for us, as we have said before from this pulpit, to accept this strange circumstance and reflect seriously upon its possible message to each one of us. I'm sure we all have had those moments these last weeks as we stay put and distance ourselves to soberly reflect on so many aspects of our lives and to wonder just what all of this means now and to question what the future may have in store for us as individuals, families, communities, nation, and world. Hence, the invitation to Holy Week with the celebration of Palm Sunday is an invitation to walk with our divine Lord in an intense way, perhaps even more this year given the unique circumstances of the health crisis we are going through.

Let us first place the liturgy of Palm Sunday in context. You can read more of these notes [on our parish website](#).

Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion (commonly known as "Palm Sunday"), the gateway to Holy Week, is first of all the great memorial of our Lord's solemn entrance into Jerusalem when he was about to suffer and to die. He did not fall a victim to man's hatred; rather, he went voluntarily to his death, with royal freedom. His death had been divinely decreed as the purchase for man's redemption. This festive entrance was his wedding march, as he proceeded to seal with blood his Bridegroom's love for us all.

Secondly, Palm Sunday is a feast in honor of Christ the King. It marks the first time during his earthly life that he allowed royal homage to be paid to him. In royal fashion he entered the "city of the great King." His kingship was the main reason why he was convicted and sentenced to die. He was, therefore, a martyr to his royal title. Throughout the world this day, the Church accords Jesus kingly homage. Into our hands the Church puts palms and olive branches, symbols of our loyalty to him and of our willingness to do him homage. Palm Sunday gives us an opportunity to profess our faith publicly in the King of kings.

Thirdly, Palm Sunday brings us face to face with suffering, for it introduces us to Christ's sacred passion, preparing us for his death on Calvary. We are to share our Master's burden, a task that becomes possible only if we ourselves are willing to become soldiers and martyrs.

Let us now reflect, then, on a particular theme which shows itself to us as we consider both the solemn entrance of our Lord into Jerusalem amid the exuberant cries of Hosanna (TRIUMPH), on the one hand, and, at the same time, the proclamation of the Passion (TRAGEDY). Triumph and Tragedy – the two sides of the same coin, as it were, which mark this holy liturgy.

Jesus enters Jerusalem to the crowd's cheers of a triumphal march of a King, only five days later to be condemned for having "claimed" that Kingship in the tragedy of his crucifixion. He marches from Triumph to Tragedy. That is the way most will have experienced the first Holy Week 2000 years ago. Triumph leads to Tragedy. Palm Sunday ends on Good Friday. That is the way the world looks at Triumph and Tragedy. Another way the world looks at it: Pride before the Fall, or Life to Death. In this worldview, the focus is on the apparent end of things: the Tragedy, the Fall, Death itself.

For us who believe that Triumph and Tragedy are flip sides of the same coin, however, we see that the Triumph of Jesus into Jerusalem will lead eventually to the Tragedy of the Cross on Good Friday; yet, at the same time, we know that the

Tragedy of Good Friday will lead to the Triumph of Easter Sunday. Tragedy and Death are not the end, but the beginning, and that reality leads to the new reality of life, life eternal, the resurrection from the tragedy of suffering, pain, and death.

Triumph and Tragedy in the life of Jesus becomes the template of life and death and life again for each one of us.

Let's consider that reality for us now in light of the particular circumstances we are going through. Three months ago, more or less, the economy was very strong, employment was exceedingly good, things were, relatively speaking, going very well for most people, materially. This was the moment of Triumph, if you will. Things looked bright. We were all looking forward to a springtime of life. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, we were struck down. Tragedy appeared like a bolt of lightning, and everything changed, and it changed so quickly that we couldn't keep up with it. Fear entered our minds and hearts. Then we ran, isolated, and hunkered down, alone and afraid.

Isn't this what, in large measure, happened to our divine Lord, the Son of Man, our Savior? They hailed him, "King," on one day, but then the clouds began to mask the sunny day and the cold of winter returned quickly. Friendships turned into betrayal. People began to distance themselves from Him. He would find all of the good He had done in three years of public ministry mean nothing. No one was remembering Him for the good He had done. All began to criticize and mock him. They would hand Him over to the most unjust condemnation of no reason at all, except to get rid of Him, to blame Him for their own tragedy of sin and to perhaps take some consolation knowing that they had found a vaccine for their problems: "Crucify him, Crucify him," they would blare with the same trumpets they had hailed Him. Make Him go away; that will solve the problem.

The real tragedy then and seemingly since that first Holy Week 2000 years ago is that mankind can't seem to understand the intelligible truth about Triumph and Tragedy, that the real Tragedy is that we still want to blame God for all of our problem and to foolishly think that if we can rid God from the picture (scapegoating), then we can figure this one out on our own (the pride of narcissism). Or, that all of our problems stem from a God who doesn't care, doesn't really want to help, really doesn't have compassion or concern and, therefore, doesn't really exist at all (modern atheism). Of course, Christianity understands the reality differently, that God can solve our problems, that only God can save us from sin, that in God alone do we trust, that out of Tragedy comes Triumph, that the winter of sin and death will bring the springtime of new life,

especially the new Triumph of the Resurrection, that, while Palm Sunday leads to Good Friday, Good Friday will lead to Easter Sunday, and that in all of this, God himself is doing it for us, not because He hates us, not because He is to blame, not because He doesn't know what He is doing, not because He does not exist, not because we deserved any of this, but because He loves us, because He is the only God the world has ever known who has experienced Triumph and Tragedy and Triumph again personally in Jesus Christ. He knows our life, our suffering, our pain, our death, our loneliness, our fear, our doubt, and all of our sin. And He walks with us even now on this incredible journey of Triumph and Tragedy and Triumph again. And He took it all on because of his immense and eternal love. And that, my dear friends, is the Triumph of this holy day and everyday of our lives now on earth as a foretaste and promise of the Triumph of Life over Death, of Triumph over Tragedy, in the resurrection.

A blessed Holy Week to all of you from your Pastor and the good people of St. Ann's Church.

Please remember to continue to support our parish at stanndc.org/give since in-person collections are not possible at this time.

Palms are blessed today, but will be distributed much later when public Masses can be celebrated again.

Celebrate again with us at stanndc.org/livestream on:
Holy Thursday at 12:00pm noon
Good Friday at 12:00pm noon
and
Easter Sunday at 11:00am with celebrant Cardinal Wuerl