

“To Whom Do You Bend the Knee? The Cost of Loyal Discipleship”
Homily for Palm Sunday
St. Mary’s Cathedral, March 28, 2021

Introduction

Our celebration of Palm Sunday this year certainly stands in contrast to what we experienced last year. Then, it was early on in the pandemic when we were strictly sheltering in place, shut out of our churches.

We are all certainly relieved and happy to be starting to emerge from this hardship, and happy to be able to be back in church, even if we still have to observe some restrictions for the sake of putting a final end to the spread of the coronavirus. The question facing us now, though, is, how has this affected us? That is, what has been the effect on us spiritually?

The Fickleness of the Human Heart

A year later it is good to examine our hearts now, compared to where we were at spiritually pre-COVID. Has it been a cause of sadness or relief that we were not able to enter church for prayer and worship? Did we redouble our efforts to keep our faith strong and our spirituality alive in other ways, especially at home, or did we give into laziness and complacency?

This past year has certainly been a trying one in many ways. Not only did we suffer the distress of the pandemic itself and the ensuing isolation and economic hardship it caused. But also the old scar of racism once again reared its ugly head, which erupted in violence on streets in cities all throughout our country.

What is more, we have been subjected to retaliatory attacks that seek to cancel out our heritage, both as a nation and as a Church. They have often taken the form of physical violence and vandalism, a frenzy of irrationality based on a revisionist understanding of history that perpetuates myths about the protagonists of Western civilization and of our own country, and is obsessed especially with rewriting the history of our own Church.

The Story of Palm Sunday

How have all of these other distresses affected us, and our relationship to Christ and to his Church?

The story of Palm Sunday teaches us just how fickle the human heart is. Happily, this year we were able to begin our ceremony with the traditional blessing and distribution of palms and reenactment of the people who welcomed our Lord into Jerusalem. The palm branch is a sign of victory, and the people welcomed him into Jerusalem as a king returning victorious from battle.

That is the Gospel read at the beginning of this Mass of Palm Sunday; but then we hear proclaimed the account of our Lord’s Passion, whence this Sunday derives its other name, Passion Sunday. At one moment they are hailing him as a victorious king, and at the next they are calling for him to be crucified as a seditious criminal. The crowds were easily swayed by the direction in which the political winds were blowing. What about us?

Strategy of the Evil One

This is always the strategy of the evil one. He uses all kinds of tactics to take us away from bowing to our Lord Jesus Christ, in order to trip us up and bow to some false god, eventually to get us to bow to him.

The loyal disciple is the one who always bows to the one who first bowed down himself, lowered himself by taking on our human flesh and having it nailed to the cross to reconcile us to the Creator from whom our sin had estranged us.

This is what St. Paul is speaking about in his Letter to the Philippians: “he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness.” And what is to be our response? “[A]t the name of Jesus every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Our response is to bend the knee to Jesus, and to him only. We are to bow to no one else. But the devil always tries: he tries to trip us up into bowing to riches, to pleasures, to the lust for power.

The Model of the Saints

This is how we began Lent, with the Gospel story of our Lord’s being tempted for forty days in the desert by the devil. These are the temptations the devil placed before him. I think, though, in these days the devil is using other techniques, seducing us to bow to fear, to ignorance, to intimidation, or just simply to convenience and complacency.

The Church has a time-honored practice that provides a constant reminder to us of the one to whom, and only to whom, we are to bend the knee: bowing the head at the mention of the name of Jesus. This Scripture passage from St. Paul’s Letter to the Philippians is where this custom comes from. And even if has to a large extent fallen out of use in everyday life, the instructions for celebrating Mass still stipulate that the priest is to bow his head at every mention of the name “Jesus.”

But then the instruction goes on to say something more, which is very pertinent for us as disciples. It says that the priest is also to bow his head at the mention of the name of Mary and, when a saint’s feast day is being celebrated, at the name of the saint of the day. These are our models, the ones who shared so intimately in our Lord’s self-emptying that we honor them with the simple little gesture that indicates their conformity to Christ in his suffering, death and Resurrection.

Conclusion

Bending the knee only to Jesus, and not being swayed by the winds of popular trends or political pressure: that requires a lot of self-emptying on our part. May the palm branches we carry today, then, not be an empty symbol. In Christian art, martyrs are depicted holding a palm branch, because they won the ultimate victory: passing through death with Christ they gained the crown of eternal glory. May we heed the reminder of the palm branches we hold today: the true victory lies in dying with Jesus by enduring the cost of bowing only to him and no one and nothing else. That is the path to the glory of Easter Sunday, which lies at the end of the Holy Week we begin today.