“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord. Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”

Homily by Most Reverend John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo

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Palm Sunday
St. Mary’s Cathedral

“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord. Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” Today the Church celebrates Palm Sunday, which is also officially called Passion Sunday. You could say that this is a day of two processions: the procession into Jerusalem, and the procession to Calvary. We began our Mass with the procession of palms, remembering that Jesus entered Jerusalem to the acclamation of the crowds who waved branches at his arrival. It was a triumphant procession for a king and filled with joy. But we also read the Passion account, the procession to Calvary, which seems to be anything but a triumph. It ended in crucifixion, and that would hardly seem like a victory.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem in a triumphant procession, the people acclaimed him as king, but they did so for the wrong reason. They were excited in their shouts of praise, because they thought Jesus was coming to be their ruler, that he would overthrow the Romans and bring them to glory. They wanted a king who would win an earthly kingdom through war, not a king who would gain a heavenly kingdom through death. So, on Good Friday the inscription on the cross, “This is the King of the Jews,” was one of mockery, not praise.

In our liturgy today, we too hail Christ as our King, but we must make sure that we do so for the right reasons. He has not promised a program of worldly peace that can be attained by earthly power and force of arms. Instead he offers us a spiritual peace and a place in his Kingdom that comes from imitating his loving obedience to God. He has proposed no political platform that will guarantee material prosperity. He proposed a sacrificial way of living that guarantees eternal happiness with God in heaven.

As we enter this Holy Week, we must accept Christ as King on his own terms; to do otherwise would be a mockery. The crowds wanted him to overthrow Pilate and the Romans, but he had something much bigger in mind. He would bear our sins and endure the worst kind of suffering and death not just to overthrow Pilate, but to overthrow sin and death once and for all. He would show himself to be a King for all eternity, a King whose power is greater than anything that we or the world had ever thought possible.

Today the Church has given us the Passion account from Luke’s Gospel. Luke’s is sometimes called the Gospel of mercy; the parable of the Prodigal Son is just one good example of his theme. But we also see evidence of this mercy in the account of our Lord’s procession to the Calvary. As Jesus is being arrested in the garden, Peter lashes out with a sword and injures a man in the crowd, but Jesus immediately reaches out to heal the wound. Later, as he is nailed and raised up on the cross, Jesus gives us a lesson in forgiveness and reconciliation: he asks the Father’s mercy on those who crucify him: “Father forgive them, because they know not what they are doing.” And then, we find Jesus speaking with the repentant thief who had been crucified with him. To this man who humbly admitted his sins, Jesus promised admission into the Kingdom of God: “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” Even throughout this sorrowful procession to Calvary, Jesus is still king, the king who heals by the power of God’s mercy. We will experience this healing too, if we accompany him along the way of this procession, if we enter into the mystery of salvation that Jesus accomplishes by dying on the cross.

Palm Sunday is filled with imagery, first the image of the procession with palms, but also the imagery of the Passion and the way of the cross. By reliving the joy of the crowds who greet Jesus on his entrance into Jerusalem, the Church begins Holy Week in anticipation of the Resurrection that will be celebrated in a week. But we also walk the procession to Calvary, a journey of sorrow that leads to our Lord’s suffering and death. It’s a somber journey, but we walk it with confidence and hope, knowing that our Lord’s kingship is most fully revealed on that sorrowful way to the cross. What will seem like a
catastrophe is in truth the Passover of the Lord to victory and exaltation. It is the supreme act of his kingship, and it is the key to our healing and our salvation.