“The Victory of Jesus, Our King”

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

April 5, 2020

Palm Sunday

Live-Streamed from St. Mary’s Cathedral, Fargo

“Hosanna to the Son of David; blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord; hosanna in the highest.” Brothers and sisters, today, Palm Sunday, we begin Holy Week. I’m sure for all of us, in the midst of the outbreak of the coronavirus, Holy Week this year will be challenging. We want to be present for the Holy Week liturgies but must stay in our homes. We want to join today in the procession of palms, but must watch from a distance. Even so, my friends, the grace of this Holy Week will be just as real, and our Lord will be near to us. Because of the unusual circumstances this year, we must be even more intentional in our prayer and in our attention to the events of our redemption. Even though we are separated by distance, we can remain in our Lord’s presence and accompany him on his journey to Jerusalem.

Two features set today’s liturgy apart. First is the blessing and procession of palms. Just as Jesus approached Jerusalem and entered in to the acclamations of the people, so today does he enter our towns, our churches, our homes, and our hearts. He comes as the Son of David, but also as the Son of God. He shows himself openly as the Messiah, the Anointed One of God, the King and Redeemer. When Jesus entered the city that day, the crowds were ecstatic; they welcomed him, they waved palms branches and covered the road with their cloaks. They were excited because they wanted Jesus to be their king, a new David, a new conqueror.

But Jesus was coming to be a different kind of king. He was the Anointed One of God, to be sure. But he wasn’t coming to destroy the Romans, he wasn’t coming to make Israel a mighty power in the region. He was coming to begin an entirely different kind of kingdom, the Kingdom of God. Jesus was coming to vanquish sin and death, he was coming to enlist us all into a Kingdom of faith, mercy, love, and forgiveness. When we wave our palms, we need to remember this.

And the second feature that sets this Mass apart is the reading of the Passion. At the beginning of Mass, we hailed Jesus as the victorious Son of David, but the Passion reminds us exactly how Jesus won his victory. He didn’t lead an army, he didn’t ride in on a stallion, he didn’t wield a sword. Jesus won his victory by an act of sacrifice, the sacrifice of his own life. He did it alone; no one else could have accomplished this. He walked under the lash of the whip through a crowd that mocked him. And instead of a sword, he carried a cross, the cross that would become his altar and his throne. There’s no doubt about it, this truly is a victory, it’s a great event. But what makes it great is the sacrificial love of Jesus, the Son of God who lived in our humanity so that he might die in our humanity. And that death was like no other; it wasn’t the defeat that it looked like. The death of Jesus would cancel the debt of sin for the whole world, for all of us. It would be the one act of love that could conquer death and sin forever.

There’s one thing that always stands out on this day: at the beginning we hear the people of Jerusalem acclaiming Jesus as King, as Son of David. They’re celebrating his arrival. But a few days later, as Jesus walked those same streets, the crowd was crying out something very
different: “Crucify him!” And when they called him King, it was a taunt and mockery. They turned on him and rejected him. Judas betrayed him and Peter denied him. Of course there were also some who stayed with him. Simon of Cyrene helped him carry the heavy cross. Mary Magdalene followed along, and Mary his mother stood by the cross.

It might seem pretty disloyal that so many of his followers fled from him, and that the crowd turned on him so violently. But that’s the nature of sin. We can say one day that we love Jesus, we believe in Jesus, and then turn right around and commit sin that mocks and rejects him. Maybe we’re not so different than the people in that crowd. We need a savior just as much as they did. But still Jesus carries the cross for us, still he pours out his life for us. That’s his victory: he forgives and redeems us. Our victory will be to accept his love, to remain faithful to him, and to share in his death and resurrection.

My brothers and sisters, as we enter into this Holy Week, this great week of grace, let us walk with Jesus in his Passion. Let us turn away from sin and lighten the weight of his cross. Let us embrace him in our brothers and sisters when they falter. And let us pray throughout this week on the great mystery of his love, a love that wins the ultimate victory, a love that never fails.