

Fr. Curtis Miller

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Homily for Palm Sunday

There seems to be war and conflict, division and confusion all around. On top of it all, people are afraid of a deadly pandemic, counting the number of cases and deaths in neighboring towns, day by day. While it sounds like I could be talking about our world today, I'm not. Instead, I'm talking about the little village of Oberammergau, Germany in the 1630s. The Thirty Years War was raging around them, there was political intrigue and drama, and most frighteningly the bubonic plague, the Black Death, was sweeping the Bavarian countryside. Oberammergau had remained safe until September 1633, when the disease first appeared in the town. Within a month, 81 people had died of this dreaded disease.

The villagers prayed that God would deliver them from this plague. Someone had the idea of making a vow, promising that if God delivered them from this scourge of death, they would honor Him by putting on a Passion Play, depicting Jesus' death and resurrection, every ten years forever. So they prayed, and so the plague stopped. No one else died in their village. And to this day, nearly four centuries later, the people of Oberammergau host a Passion Play every ten years. It has only been delayed a few times, due to war and disease, including last year's performance, postponed until 2022 due to the Covid pandemic. When they do host the play again next year, two thousand villagers will participate as a literal cast of thousands, putting on the play day after day, lasting about five hours a day, for several months. Hundreds of thousands of people travel from around the world to witness this moving depiction of Jesus' final days, including my grandparents who saw its last production in 2010.

Why did the villagers make this vow? Perhaps because they understood the connection between Jesus' death and our prayers to be delivered from death.

In its latest version a decade ago, the play begins with Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, mounted on a donkey, as the crowds greet Him with rejoicing. Predominant in this crowd are the children of the village, singing Hosannas and a special hymn. But we know how the story goes. Within a few days, the crowds turn on Jesus, taking offense when He drives the money changers from the Temple and seems to blaspheme by hinting that He is the Son of God. Jesus is arrested and condemned, the crowd shouting for Him to be crucified. But significantly, this is no longer a crowd of joyful children. It is a crowd of the elders, shouting from beneath their venerable beards. It is as if to say, symbolically, that these are the people who have grown old in sin, self-centeredness, and cynicism. They have lost the joyful open heart of youth.

This doesn't have to do with chronological age, but with what we might call spiritual age. As we begin Holy Week, whether we're older or younger, it would be good for us to look at our own hearts and souls. Do I still welcome Jesus into my life with youthful joy, or have I allowed my soul to grow old with sin? Let us pray, asking Jesus to restore the joy of our youth, to always have a heart that welcomes Him, and to shake off the dust of the sins that age us and weigh us down. That way, when we gather again next week for Easter, we will be able to celebrate Jesus' resurrection with deeper faith and love.