

2020 0404 Palm Sunday Homily (St. John's for live broadcast)

On the first Sunday of Lent, 5 weeks ago, I encouraged us to make this ...“the best Lent ever”. I am not sure if we accomplished that but I am sure of one thing: this will be the most unforgettable Lent ever!

Because of the pandemic it would be easy to almost skip over Palm Sunday this year. We had no blessing of the palms, we are having no distribution of the palms, we had no Bible reading about the Palm Sunday celebration. So this year it would be easy to just move on and focus on the rest of Holy Week.

But Palm Sunday is too important and it has too powerful a message for us to ignore, especially this year.

Today we are 38 days into Lent. Did you remember that Palms started Lent on Ash Wednesday...We received the burnt palm ashes on our forehead. And today we celebrate Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. Five weeks ago we were reminded of our mortality, our sinfulness, our need for penance and prayer. Today we celebrate with new palms, a new beginning. So the palms are a reminder that we are beginning the holiest week of the year.

On that First Palm Sunday the crowds were enthusiastic. It is estimated that there could have been 2 and a half million Jews crammed into Jerusalem in preparation to celebrate Passover.

Jesus arrives riding on a donkey, the crowds are going wild and cheering, laying their coats on the road in front of Jesus. The crowds are shouting, “Hosanna”, which means “save us”. For them, Jesus is their Messiah, their King.

The 1st Palm Sunday question for us today is Why did the Cheering Stop? What happened after that wild Sunday Celebration. It is striking: the contrast between the cheering of Palm Sunday and the sorrow of the Passion, just one week later.

Jerusalem was a walled city. The walls separated the haves from the have nots. The men and women who lived outside the walls, in the countryside and on the roads, didn't have the money or the prestige to live inside the

city. They didn't have the power or the influence...**BUT** they are the ones who acclaimed Jesus as their Messiah with shouts of Hosanna.

The ones outside are the ones living on the margins. The ones who don't get invited to the banquets or special places at the table, or places of honor in the temple. Jesus' mission has been toward them. Finally, here is someone to tell them they are not forgotten but even loved by God. Jesus heals their afflictions, cures their blindness, lameness, bleeding, and leprosy.

Then Jesus leaves this celebration and enters the city gates. The Gospel tell us that Jesus enters the city..alone. He walks through the gates...The walls that kept the poor out and the powerful in. Once he passes beyond the walls everything changes. Now he is with the rich and the influential. They do not cheer Him but rather mock Him and accuse him of blasphemy. Jesus goes into Jerusalem where he meets his opposition and eventual death. It is striking to hear earlier in Matthew's gospel that when Jesus enters Jerusalem "the whole town is shaken and the insiders ask "who is this?"" The crowd outside has to tell them "This is Jesus the Prophet". The people inside the walls did not think they "needed" Jesus, they did not even know who Jesus was. They are comfortable with their lives. They were happy just the way things were.

It is interesting to note that in all 4 Gospels, after Jesus enters Jerusalem, once he is inside the walls, there is not another report of a miracle of someone being healed. In fact, the first thing he does upon entering the city is to go into the temple, throw out the money changers and then HE invites in the poor...the lame and the blind. Jesus dares to invite all people, even the outcasts, into the Temple. Jesus has challenged the insiders, he has disrupted their lives.

So the 2nd question for us today is where do we find ourselves...inside or outside the walls.

Are we more like the people inside the walls? We might go to Mass but we don't really need Jesus. We are comfortable with our lives and don't really want to change our status quo, didn't want to depend on Him. Or are we outside the walls. In search of Jesus, trying to find Him each day in our lives, willing to follow him wherever He might lead us.

The interesting thing about this pandemic of COVID-19 is that it has put all of us, at least temporarily, outside the walls. We are all affected by this virus. We are all impacted. Many of us have lost our jobs, many of us cannot visit our neighbors or even our family members. We all feel isolated. We all have anxiety about the future.

We are all outside the walls...but we are outside the walls together as a Church, as a loving community. Our church buildings may be closed but the Church is NOT closed. **We** are the church. All of you watching are the Church. Are WE closed? Our buildings may be temporarily shuttered but we, the church, remain open. We are watching out for our neighbors who might be in need. We are reaching out to our fellow parishioners with phone calls. We are watching out for our neighbors with food deliveries. If anyone needs any help or just a listening ear, we, the church, are here for you. Please call the church office if you need anything..if there is anything we can do to support you...

Pope Francis has said the Church should be like a field hospital....healing the wounds of the suffering. I believe, maybe for the first time, we, the church, are truly functioning as a field hospital. Caring for our neighbor, caring for the lonely, caring for fearful. And because of that, we will become a stronger community and a stronger Church.

Today Jesus invites us to join Him outside the walls. But a warning: There is a risk if you join Him, if you follow him. He just might change your values, your priorities, even your vocation. We have one week left: We can still make this our best Lent ever.

For us, the Church, that we will continue to live outside the walls and reach out to our neighbors and all those in need.

For us, the Church, on this Palm Sunday, that we continue to celebrate the love and joy that Jesus brings into our lives.

LORD JESUS, FOR THE TIMES WE HAVE LOST FAITH IN YOUR FORGIVENESS
AND HEALING TOUCH, LHM

CHRIST JESUS, FOR THE TIMES WE DID NOT REACH OUT TO OUR NEIGHBOR
IN NEED, CHM

LORD JESUS, FOR THE TIMES WE DID NOT TURN TO YOU IN OUR LONELINESS
AND SUFFERING, LHM