A Chinese sage, quoted by Lin Yutang in *The Importance of Living* said: “A man getting drunk at a farewell party should strike a musical tone, in order to strengthen his spirit … and a drunk military man should order gallons and **put out more flags** in order to increase his military splendour.” The English author, Evelyn Waugh, took that striking line, **Put Out More Flags**, and made it the title of his sixth novel published in 1942. His novel includes a cast of decadents — mostly British aristocrats — who encounter first the dormant conflict of the novel’s “Phoney War,” and then the truly devastating events in 1940 with the invasion of continental Europe and the blitz over England by the Third Reich. The novel shows these true “characters” advance from peacetime lives of ennui and superficiality yielding to a sense in wartime of resolve and commonality with their fellow men and women. It gives us pause to reflect on how our well-ordered lives have been disrupted by COVID-19.

Jesus’ triumphant pilgrimage and procession into Jerusalem with the **palms put out** and strewn in His path seems at first to be a small pilgrimage to death. And yet it is really a pilgrimage to life.

We are stripped to the bare bones of the rituals of Holy Week this year. From being a seminarian to being an associate pastor and now a pastor, I recall all the years of hearing others demand, **put out more palms**. Usually, pastors are in the habit of constantly **putting out more palms** in hopes that folks swarming to Mass on Palm Sunday might, by picking up and taking home a strand of palm, recall and reflect upon what Jesus has done for them: to be refreshed in our innate connection to Him by our baptism into His Precious Blood at the time of His Passion and Death.

After having underwent the agony in the garden where his sweat was such as blood pouring out from His very being; after having stomached the betrayal of one of his closest friends made insufferable by the touch of a malevolent kiss by betraying Him and all the goodness for which He stood; after having suffered the most brutal scourging of 39 times or more gashing his flesh with open wounds and sores; after having been blindfolded, spat upon, mocked as “King of the Jews” with cat-o-nine tails; after having been crowned with a heavy, cutting and most cruelly humiliating crown of thorns; after having spent the night, stripped of all earthly dignity; in sheer horror having inhabited overnight in complete darkness, a pit — the size of a deep well — inside the prison where he was held; and, then, after having suffered the contempt in the kangaroo trials by
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Caiaphas, the high priest, by the puppet king Herod, and by imperial Rome in the guise of Pilate, after having endured all in silence, in humility — with pain screaming out in every brain cell if not from his mouth — Jesus was only then condemned to death. Pilate handed the Son of God His death sentence: the most unjust condemnation for the most innocent man ever to walk the face of the earth, who only did good for all others.

We marvel, do we not, in pouring over the Gospel accounts of the Passion how like most of us, Our Lord would not after having suffered terribly the most horrific physical, mental, emotional and spiritual torments, all on account of our sins, at the moment of receiving his death sentence doesn’t cry out as — we would be tempted to and seemingly would do. After having lived for so long the comfortable lives so many of us do, merely enduring, at most, the inconveniences of first world problems, would we not cry out, were we in Christ’s place, “Just put me to death now, slay me on the spot and be finished with me!” How many of us would have just sat down and taunted their persecutors to be done with them by a spear or a blade at that moment, not cooperating with the sheer torture of carrying the cross in the worst of circumstances, with all the loss of one’s blood — in effect rejecting the most unjust condemnation and death sentence. Our pilgrimage to our death we would most likely have demanded end immediately at that time, succumbing to our weaknesses. And what would that have shown if Jesus, like we would be wont to do, refused to take up His Cross and walk the Via Dolorosa—the Way of Sorrow? One can argue that such an action by recoiling from accepting the unjust judgement would be an instance by mere action requesting euthanasia—in effect dodging even worse misery by wanting death before it was meant to happen, even though it be a most unmerciful and completely unjustified death sentence.

Instead, what did Jesus demonstrate to us? The greatest manly dignity ever displayed in the world, beyond any superhero status in doing God the Father’s will. Seemingly drained of strength, Jesus demonstrated the greatest heroism after the condemnation, in taking up His Cross, and completing His pilgrimage to death. But His pilgrimage was such to demonstrate for all of us what is most important even in this time of personal social distancing—this time of seeking out physical space between ourselves and others rather than allowing ourselves to be physically together. All along the way known in Jerusalem as the Via Dolorosa, the Way of Sorrow, in His own Way of the
Cross, we see how this most dignified man, this man of super-human strength who at the same time was the first and greatest gentleman ever, *touched* others’ lives in the most profound way, both at that moment and for eternity. **And as God and Man, He chose to have others’ lives touch His — He allowed Himself to be profoundly touched by others** as we read in the Gospel accounts and recall in the Stations of the Cross — by Simon of Cyrene, by Dismas, the Good Thief, by Veronica, by the Holy Women of Jerusalem, and by His own Blessed Mother and beloved apostle John, and even, yes, by the contempt of the crowd: “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.” That is why on Jesus’ Royal Road of Suffering, He did not fall prey to hastening His death to get to his Father’s side. As Our Redeemer, **He continues to be profoundly touched by how each of us how in our time, individually reacts to His Passion and Death.**

He chose to accept and bear out His unjust sentence of death to redeem the world and that His grace might come down to the end of time to touch all lives who accept it for salvation. This is why the pilgrimage into Jerusalem with such fanfare of *putting out the palms* mattered — it was not the pilgrimage so much to His Passion and death but a pilgrimage ending in His opening the gates of eternal life to the Kingdom of God to all who believe and seek to walk in His strong but gentle way.

Jesus chose the pilgrimage through His death to new eternal life to reveal for all time His undying love for each of us that His sacrificial death demonstrated.

At the time of our births, each of us has been given a death sentence, a termination date only God knows. For some if will come sooner, others later. The current crisis in our first world lives should make us pause, reflect and meditate upon what is important not only to us individually, but if we are truly Christian, then the most important thing is in bringing about the Kingdom of God. This is the one thing Jesus constantly tried to do, to bring about the Kingdom of God. In the world in which we live, how do we respond — in charity, in compassion, in point of purpose, in seeking solidarity with those who on this planet have not been blessed as we have with so many material comforts and conveniences, who have always had life so very much harder, with untold crosses they shoulder. As we pour over the Passion accounts in the Gospel, as we pray the Via Crucis this
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Holy Week, let us pause and ask ourselves: are we willing to be like the characters from the Stations of the Cross: a Simon of Cyrene bearing another’s burdens in helping them carry their crosses; a Veronica of compassion tending to the many wounds of others, whatever those wounds be; the holy women of Jerusalem who shared by expression their sorrow at the thought of losing Jesus. Or are we simply inconvenienced that our children’s schools and sports activities have been shuttered and we are only content to have our old normalcy return to us as we are fine with how the status quo in the world has been now for decades?

Let us pray that the Jesus in this Holy Week touches more souls than ever in a more profound way than any physical touch — in touching all hearts and souls to a deeper conversion of walking in His way. Let us pray that we may seek to be more transformed into Christ’s likeness by not only feeling for our suffering brothers and sisters but in responding to them in deep charity just as He showed in His final hours on the road to Calvary and on the Cross with the utmost compassion and love for others. Let us pray that we may demonstrate like Simon of Cyrene a willingness to help carry others’ crosses. And let us pray that Christ’s revelation of His humbleness grace each of us with a humility in allowing others to help us as individuals carry our own crosses in our lives.

Put out more palms, would be the usual refrain of pastors and priests throughout Christendom today for people to take them home. Yet, palms all fall to dust and become the ashes to make crosses on foreheads at the start of next Lent — if we are even then allowed to touch anyone. But how these sacramentals touch us is far more important than just them being in our hands or on our foreheads: it is that even when we cannot have physical contact with each other, Jesus of Nazareth, who is the Christ, the Son of God and Son of Man, comes to our aid to touch us when those physically near us cannot. He touches us more deeply and most profoundly to the core of our beings. Absorbed by His grace alone, we realize that He is what sustains us in peacetime, in war, in sickness, in health, until death do us part, because we are members of His Bride, the Church founded by Him as Bridegroom. Yes, we pray that pastors next year will put out more palms for all the faithful to glory in their Christian heritage and appreciate ever more all that we have received.

Amen!