

Following Jesus on the Royal Road of the Cross

Biblical Reflection for Palm Sunday C

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, MARCH 23, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- On Palm Sunday this year we hear two sections of Luke's Gospel -- the first at the blessing of the palms and the second at the reading of St. Luke's passion narrative. With the royal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem (19:28-21:38), a new section of the Gospel begins -- the ministry of Jesus in Jerusalem before his death and resurrection.

In a burst of enthusiasm, the people of Jerusalem waved palm branches and greeted Jesus as he entered the city riding on an ass. The acclamation: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord" (v. 38) is only found in Luke's Gospel where Jesus is explicitly given the title king when he enters Jerusalem in triumph. Luke has inserted this title into the words of Psalm 118:26 that heralded the arrival of the pilgrims coming to the holy city and to the temple.

Jesus is thereby acclaimed as king and as the one who comes (Malachi 3:1; Luke 7:19). The disciples' acclamation: "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest" echoes the announcement of the angels at the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:14). The peace Jesus brings is associated with the salvation to be accomplished in Jerusalem. There is an internal unity between the Infancy and Passion Narratives of Luke's Gospel.

Luke is dependent upon Mark for the composition of his Passion narrative (22:14-23:56), but he has incorporated much of his own special tradition into the narrative. Among the distinctive sections in Luke's Passion story of Jesus are: (1) the tradition of the institution of the Eucharist (22:15-20); (2) Jesus' farewell discourse (22:21-38); (3) the mistreatment and interrogation of Jesus (22:63-71); (4) Jesus before Herod and his second appearance before Pilate (23:6-16); (5) words addressed to the women followers on the way to the crucifixion (23:27-32); (6) words to the penitent thief (23:39-41); (7) the death of Jesus (23:46, 47b-49).

Palm of Triumph

The peaceful figure of Jesus rises above the hostility and anger of the crowds and the legal process. Jesus remains a true model of reconciliation, forgiveness and peace. In the midst of his own agony and trial, we realize the depths of Jesus' passion for unity: He is capable of uniting even Pilate and Herod together in friendship (23:12). From the cross, Luke presents Jesus forgiving his persecutors (23:34) and the dying Jesus allows even a thief to steal paradise! (23:43).

Throughout his account, Luke stresses the innocence of Jesus (23:4, 14-15, 22) who is the victim of the powers of evil (22:3, 31, 53) and who goes to his death in fulfillment of his Father's will (22:42, 46). Luke emphasizes the mercy, compassion, and healing power of Jesus (22:51; 23:43) who does not go to death lonely and deserted, but is accompanied by others who follow him on the way of the cross (23:26-31, 49).

In Luke's moving story, the palm of triumph and the cross of the Passion are not a contradiction. Herein lies

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the heart of the mystery proclaimed during Holy Week. Jesus gave himself up voluntarily to the Passion; he was not crushed by forces greater than himself. He freely faced crucifixion and in death was triumphant.

Role Models

Along the way of the cross, Luke offers us role models, who teach us to live in our daily lives Jesus' Passion as a journey toward a resurrection. As the execution detail leads Jesus from the governor's palace to the rock quarry outside the gates of the city where public executions took place, they impound Simon of Cyrene, a passerby, to carry the cross of Jesus (23:26). Luke's wording makes it clear that he sees in the figure of Simon an image of discipleship: Simon takes up the cross of Jesus and carries it "behind Jesus."

The phrase is identical to Jesus' own teaching on discipleship: "Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:27). Those who would live the way of Jesus must be willing to pour out their life on behalf of others. The mere fact of carrying the cross is not what is most important. Many persons in this world suffer dramatically: Every people, every family has on its shoulders sorrows and burdens to bear. That which gives fullness of meaning to the cross is to carry it behind Jesus, not in a journey of anguished solitude, hopeless wandering or rebellion, but rather in a journey sustained and nourished by the presence of the Lord.

In Luke 23:27 we read "large crowds of people followed Jesus including many women who mourned and lamented him." A sharing, which consists only in compassionate words or even in tears, is not enough. Each of us must be aware of our own responsibility in the drama of suffering, especially in the suffering of the just and the innocent. Jesus' words in Luke 23:31 invite us to a realistic reading of the history of individuals and of communities. "For if these things are done when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?" For example, if the innocent one is struck down in this way, what will happen to those who are responsible for the evil that comes about in the history of individuals and nations?

Jesus did not understand his earthly existence as a search for power, as a race for success or a career, as a desire to dominate others. On the contrary, as we read in today's second reading from St. Paul's letter to the community at Philippi, he gave up the privileges of his equality with God, took the form of a servant, became like men and was obedient to the Father's plan unto death on the cross (Philippians 2:6-11). In commemorating the events of Holy Week, we do much more than just recall Christ's suffering and glorification. We actually celebrate his life and share in his victory. The saving power of his Death and Resurrection enters our lives. And Jesus becomes light and salvation for each individual and for all of humanity.

25th Anniversary

This year we also observe the 25th anniversary of the institution of World Youth Day on Palm Sunday. Benedict XVI recently said: "This great event, so ardently desired by the Venerable Pope John Paul II, was a prophetic initiative that has borne abundant fruits, enabling new generations of Christians to come together, to listen to the Word of God, to discover the beauty of the Church and to live experiences of faith that have led many to give themselves totally to Christ."

World Youth Days, by design, draw in as many participants as possible, and remain a living memorial to the late Pope John Paul II, who understood instinctively why young people would respond to them. In remarks at the concluding Mass thanking Benedict XVI for his participation in Australia's 2008 World Youth Day, Sydney's Cardinal George Pell said that World Youth Day acts as an antidote to images of Catholicism as in decline or wracked by controversy. "It shows the Church as it really is, alive with evangelical energy."

Cardinal Pell concluded his address to the Pope with prophetic and affirming words: "Your Holiness, the

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World Youth Days were the invention of Pope John Paul the Great. The World Youth Day in Cologne was already announced before your election. You decided to continue the World Youth Days and to hold this one in Sydney. We are profoundly grateful for this decision, indicating that the World Youth Days do not belong to one Pope, or even one generation, but are now an ordinary part of the life of the Church. The John Paul II generation -- young and old alike -- is proud to be faithful sons and daughters of Pope Benedict."

Remembering Toronto

Let me conclude by sharing the deeply moving words of Pope John Paul II in his final homily at Canada's 2002 World Youth Day in Toronto. We need to hear these words, now more than ever.

He said: "Even a tiny flame lifts the heavy lid of night. How much more light will you make, all together, if you bond as one in the communion of the Church! If you love Jesus, love the Church!"

"Do not be discouraged by the sins and failings of some of her members. The harm done by some priests and religious to the young and vulnerable fills us all with a deep sense of sadness and shame. But think of the vast majority of dedicated and generous priests and religious whose only wish is to serve and do good!"

"There are many priests, seminarians and consecrated persons here today; be close to them and support them! And if, in the depths of your hearts, you feel the same call to the priesthood or consecrated life, do not be afraid to follow Christ on the royal road of the Cross!"

"At difficult moments in the Church's life, the pursuit of holiness becomes even more urgent. And holiness is not a question of age; it is a matter of living in the Holy Spirit."

May the Venerable Pope John Paul II continue to watch over us and bless us from the window of the Father's house.

[The readings for Palm Sunday are Isaiah 50:4-7; Philippians 2:6-11; and Luke 22:14-23:56 or 23:1-49]

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On the Net:

Salt and Light: www.saltandlighttv.org

For those using Year A Readings for the Catechumenate (RCIA): "If Only You Had Been There"
www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJ5BtFPSttY

Lenten Reflection for Holy Week (Year A) "Why this Week is Different":
www.youtube.com/watch?v=NmL3Nd1aljE&feature=related

Thank You JPII: www.youtube.com/watch?v=tN8SflZ0uR4&feature=channel

or

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Thank You JPII (longer version): www.saltandlighttv.org/prog_slprog_thanku_jp2.html

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