

Homily for Palm Sunday

March 21, 2021

Today we celebrate Palm Sunday; the only day of the year that has two Gospel readings in the liturgy. The first is about Christ's triumphant entry into Jerusalem. The second is about Christ's crucifixion and death. Triumph turned into tragedy; or so it would seem.

Both readings have a tree that plays an important role in the narrative.

In the first Gospel reading it is the palm tree. Palm trees were abundant in ancient Israel. Their branches had a religious significance that went back to the time when God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.

At that time was established the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths (Sukkot) celebrated annually over a seven-day period. It reminded the Jewish people how God had led them by His presence through the desert, where they lived in tents, to the Promised Land, and how the Lord provided for their needs.

During the feast Jews would dwell in booths made of palm branches and other leafy boughs (Leviticus 23: 40-43) and each day they would wave a ceremonial fan made from the branches of several trees, including the palm.

King Solomon had carved onto the interior walls of the Temple figures of cherubim, flowers and palm trees (1 Kings 6:29).

After the successful Maccabean Revolt against the Seleucid Empire (mid-2nd century BC), the Jews celebrated the recapture of the fortress in Jerusalem by singing hymns, playing musical instruments, and carrying palm branches (1 Maccabees 13:51).

The palm branch symbolized God's care of His people and His liberation of them from their oppressors.

And so, when Jesus was nearing Jerusalem as the city prepared to celebrate the Passover, a great crowd gathered around Him shouting "Hosanna," laying their cloaks at His feet, and carrying palm branches. For they recognized Him as the Messiah sent by God to save them from their oppressors.

And they were right, He was their Messiah, the Christ, but the liberation He would bring was not from their latest conquerors but from the root of all human evil and separation from God: sin.

And so, we come to the second tree. The Tree of the Cross.

Both Acts 5:30 and 1 Peter 2:24 refer to the cross on which Christ was crucified as a "tree." Not that it was an actual tree – though made from the stalk of one – but what they are suggesting is that the wood of the cross is analogous to a tree. Why?

Maybe to draw our minds back to another tree, an ancient tree, mentioned in Genesis and located in the Garden of Eden (2:9; 3:22). In

the midst of the Garden there were two trees, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and the Tree of Life. Adam ate the fruit of the first tree but was cast out before he could eat the fruit of the other.

But in the fullness of time, in another garden, was planted a new Tree of Life, the cross of Christ (see John 19:41). As the serpent conquered on a tree, so now by a tree he is conquered. By the fruit of one tree death arose, by the fruit of another tree everlasting life springs forth.

And Saint Albert the Great reminds us that we today still partake of the fruit of that tree, in the Eucharist: "This is the fruit of the tree of life. Anyone who receives this sacrament with devotion of sincere faith will never taste death. It is a tree of life for those who grasp it, and blessed is he who holds it fast."

As the ancient Israelites saw in palm branches a symbol of God's providing for them and the victory that His Messiah would bring over their oppressors, so Christians now recognize in the Cross of Christ *the* sign of God's providential love of humanity and His victory over sin. And we place that symbol in our churches and often around our necks.

In the Book of Revelation we read: "*Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the Tree of Life that is in the paradise of God*" (Rev. 2:7).

Today we hold palms. But everyday we hold firm to the cross of Christ on which hung our salvation. Come, let us adore.