

Palm Sunday Reflection by Fr. John —

A palm-less Palm Sunday. Who woulda thought? The Holy Week that never was. And still we keep the faith: that Jesus rose from the dead and keeps his promise to us followers that if we believe in Him and live like Him, we will have eternal life.

On Palm Sunday the focus is on two aspects of Christ's life. The first is Jesus's kingship. Jesus is called the Christ, the Anointed One, the Messiah, the King of Israel. It is said mockingly, of course, by the Romans and the Jewish religious leaders. And some things never change: he is still mocked by unbelievers today. We recognize His kingship, not just of Israel, but of the whole universe. We honor this on the last Sunday of our church year every November, the weekend before the start of Advent.

The other aspect we honor on Palm Sunday is His Passion: his suffering and death. That is today's Gospel. We hear a Passion Gospel every year to benefit those who cannot join us in church on Good Friday, its ultimate celebration. This year it's the Gospel of Matthew's.

Many of us have seen Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. It is focused on the horrific physical sufferings that Jesus endured during His Passion from the Garden of Gethsemane to His death on the cross. We honor that. But when I saw the film, what struck me just as much was the psychological suffering he was feeling during this timeline: his betrayal by Judas, being abandoned by His disciples, denied by Peter, rejection by the religious leaders, mocked by the Romans, laughed at, insulted and spit on by the citizens of Jerusalem on the way along the cross and at the crucifixion site.

The writers of the Gospels were focused on that, too. They don't dwell on the physical sufferings – they are referenced, but not described at length (Mel Gibson got that from other accounts about crucifixions, which was the Romans preferred and common method of execution for anyone challenging their authority). The four evangelists focus on the emotional and moral suffering Jesus endured: his aloneness, being humiliated, misunderstood. It is his dark night of the soul, entering the black hole of human existence, the prospect of death.

Jesus had to prepare himself in the Garden of Gethsemane for his emotional crucifixion before he could face the physical one. An excellent guide to understanding this is a book by Fr. Ronald Rolheiser, whom I think is the greatest author of Catholic Spirituality today, much like Bishop Fulton J. Sheen was in the 50's and Fr. Henri Nouwen in the 60's and 70's. His book, *The Passion and the Cross*, is a wonderful reflection on Jesus's Way of the Cross.

There's an old phrase, "You never get the cross you want." We're going through some of that now in our coronavirus "prisons." Our greatly decreased socialization hurts, our inability to worship with our friends and receive the Eucharist hurts. But our Church has always spoken about "redemptive suffering." Fr. Ron writes about that at the beginning of his book, that we know we are somehow participating in Jesus's sufferings, and they are redemptive for us. Our sufferings mature us, they make us more compassionate; they are redemptive. Somehow, they become meaningful when we're out of control, when we're helpless.

As Fr. Ron writes, "The cross teaches us that we, like Jesus, give as much to others in our passivities as in our activities ... the opportunity to give our love and ourselves to others in a very deep way."

For Jesus, the choice was how to die: angry, bitter and resentful? Or with the forgiving heart He preached, despite the unfairnesses of life? That is the choice we have to make, too. As Fr. Ron says, we have to die before we die; we have to make that choice on how we will die before we die. Will we die faithful to love, with trust and hope? Or will we die despairing, with hate and vengefulness? How will we give over our spirit? Think about that today. Make your choice! Because in this case especially, not to choose is to choose.