

Sunday Homily

PALM SUNDAY

28 MARCH 2021

YEAR B

“Those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!’ ... Pilate spoke to them again, ‘Then what do you wish me to do the with the man you call the King of the Jews?’ They shouted back, ‘Crucify him!’”

Mark 11:9; 15:12-13

Illustration

Displayed in a showcase in the Great Hall of Lambeth Palace are the gloves which Charles I wore to his execution in Whitehall in January 1649. As he began to remove his outer garments, Charles gave his gloves to William Juxon, Bishop of London, who accompanied him to the scaffold. When Juxon later became Archbishop of Canterbury, he took the gloves with him, and they have remained at Lambeth ever since. Charles took great pride in his personal appearance, and dressed as carefully for his execution as for any other public occasion. It was a matter of honour that he should be seen to die well.

Gospel Teaching

In his first letter, St Peter tells us that Jesus also died well: “When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.” But for Jesus it was more than just a matter of honour. Peter is telling us of Jesus’ complete and willing obedience to fulfil God’s purpose.

Relatively early in his Gospel, Luke tells us that Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem”. When Peter suggested there might be another way, Jesus reprimanded him angrily: “Get behind me, Satan!” It is the utter self-giving of Jesus, even to death itself, that restores, to those who have faith, our broken relationship with God. This is the drama which is played out through the events of Holy Week. We separate out those events in order to concentrate on the special meaning of each one of them, but we have at the same time to see them as a whole – Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Eve, Easter Day itself. The crowd in Jerusalem were witnesses to this unfolding drama, and found themselves caught up in it.

Crowds are notoriously fickle, and easily swayed. Those who had clamoured for the head of Charles I fell silent as the executioner raised his axe, and uttered a deep groan as the royal head was severed from the body. There was some kind of latent understanding that this was a unique moment. Never in the long history of England had the monarch been brought to public trial and execution.

Perhaps some similar kind of awareness permeated the crowd who welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem. They welcomed him in words reserved for, and applicable only to, the Messiah, the long-expected anointed one of God. But as the days passed, and events became ugly, the mood of the crowd changed. The voices that had been raised in welcome now called for his death: "Crucify him!" The soldiers made the most of their opportunity to beat up the condemned prisoner, and no doubt the crowd approved of what they saw. Even that was not enough for some. As Jesus hung upon the cross, "those who passed by derided him". The whole range of instincts and emotions which are at work within a crowd, even in our own day, were focused on Jesus during those last few tumultuous days of his life.

Application

We would naturally want to dissociate ourselves from any suggestion that we might be caught up in the mixed instincts of a crowd. We identify ourselves with the Good Samaritan, and condemn the priest and the Levite who passed by on the other side. Yet honesty demands that we recognise within ourselves the same fickleness which was at work amongst the crowd in Jerusalem. We may sing, "Thine be the glory", yet there is little glory in our lives. Or we may sing, "Make me a channel of your peace" – while conflict dominates our church or personal life. We want to believe, as did the crowd on Palm Sunday, that Jesus represents the answer to our hopes and prayers, while knowing that having faith does not protect us from life's problems. As we share the uncertainties of the crowd, we perhaps feel unworthy and discouraged.

But if we do, we load ourselves with unnecessary guilt and fail to grasp the meaning of Palm Sunday, Holy Week and Easter. "While we still were sinners," wrote Paul, "Christ died for us." And he rose again. Our response is one of faith. No matter how fickle that faith may seem, God accepts us through the crucified and risen Lord. So on this Palm Sunday, as we head together into this most holy week, let us be encouraged as well as challenged by our most holy Lord.