

PALM SUNDAY YEAR C (Homily 02)  
(Isaiah 50:4-7; Psalm 22; Phil 2:6-11; Lk 22:14-23:56)  
“Palm Sunday – Feast of Compassion and Forgiveness”

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Did you notice the transition in the passion story today – from Jesus the Celebrity, to Jesus the Crucified?

Palm Sunday is an invitation to see the Cross as a blessing, as a source of compassion, forgiveness and hope for all.

Human beings are easily impressed and very predictable. We so easily gravitate towards possessions, prestige and power. We are impressed by the rich like the oil tycoons we hear of. We get all caught up in the media lives of the famous, like movie stars and sport heroes such as O.J. Simpson. We are easily awed by the powerful, such as influential politicians and important executives. It is human nature to be impressed by the strong, the beautiful and the famous.

In one of his articles, Ron Rolheiser, noted theologian and spiritual writer, points out that it is compassion, not celebrity that gives meaning to life. Many of the rich and famous had lives that were far from happy, and deaths that were often tragic. People like Princess Diana, Elvis Presley and Michael Jackson come to mind immediately. It is not fame and celebrity that gives meaning to life, but compassion and forgiveness.

This is the truth that Jesus lived without wavering. When Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, people were impressed by how strong, famous and accomplished he seemed. Three years earlier, he was unknown. Now he was the leader of the most significant peace and justice movement in all of Israel. He was entering the heart of the nation as a real folk hero. People hailed him as a future king and political leader.

How surprised, and shocked they were, when they discovered that, yes, Jesus was a king and leader, but very different from what they expected. Rather than move to the top with the rich, famous and strong, Jesus deliberately moved to the bottom. He chose to enter into the heart of our suffering humanity. He endured resistance, unbelief, apathy, libel, injustice, hatred, torture and murder from the hands of others. From his own disciples he endured betrayal in many forms: lack of faith, lack of understanding (to

want greatness was to already have betrayed him and made the wrong choice), as well as denial and betrayal.

Jesus was King, yes, but King of the Suffering. And in his kingdom, he stands not beside the rich, famous and powerful, but beside the poor and the outcast, those rejected by others. In his kingdom, it is the weak, the lowly, the humble and the discouraged he has lifted up. Throughout his life among us here on earth he showed constant compassion, and on the cross, he demonstrated life-giving forgiveness. And that love is a source of hope for the suffering, the sinner, the failure.

To follow Jesus is to understand and live this mystery - the mystery of the Cross as a blessing. There are some powerful examples for us. Mother Theresa of Calcutta was a frail nun who picked up dying people off the street and gave orphaned children a home. She chose to enter into their suffering and found Jesus there. Jean Vanier, founder of L'Arche Homes for the mentally challenged, chose to live with and share in their suffering and finds Jesus there.

We are invited to follow Jesus, and to find him, in suffering and in failure - our own, and that of others. It is in our past: our story, our hurt, our pain, our failures and suffering, not in trying to escape it through addictions, that we will find the King of Suffering.

How can we find him in our suffering? In the kingdom (and the church) the requirement is not that one never have failed but that one has *turned back* to God for forgiveness and healing. "Once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers," Jesus said to Peter. That was Peter's experience of forgiveness and healing, and it is meant to be ours as well.

The readings today flesh out this teaching. The first reading proclaims that one who is rooted in God's word can endure suffering. The Psalm in its turn presents the lament of one who is suffering, who is experiencing the apparent absence of God, yet it ends in a tremendous outpouring of faith in God expressed through praise.

Through the powerful gospel proclaimed today, we relive the passion and death of Jesus, the suffering servant. On the cross, Jesus himself experienced the apparent absence of God and quoted today's Psalm. This moving story fulfills the first two readings and sets up Paul's hymn to the Philippians

which echoes both the first reading and the Psalm. It is a summary of the kenosis of Jesus, the emptying out of his very being on the cross, and his subsequent exaltation to the right hand of the Father, because of his faith in the Father's love for him.

An example for us is Mike, a man in his fifties in the States whose foolish mistakes led him to poverty and depression. He had been left a house, car and estate by his father, but made extravagant expenses, no investments, and entered into risky relationships for fun and pleasure, just like the prodigal son. At one point he was suicidal because he had \$30,000.00 worth of debts on a variety of credit cards. He was fired from his job, forced to sell his house, and was so paralyzed by depression and anxiety that he failed job interviews. He was surviving one day at a time, but finally reached out to friends for help, and came back to God for forgiveness and healing. He returned to a 12 Step group and is now slowly putting his life back together.

Let us take time this Holy Week to take stock of our lives, of our relationship with God, with others and with our own selves. Let us turn back to God by celebrating a good confession and receiving God's forgiveness and healing, and then we will truly be able to celebrate Easter having experienced it already.

The Eucharist is a celebration of the Lord's passion, death and resurrection. It is a commitment to follow him, to find him, the King of Suffering, in the suffering of the world, in our own suffering, our own failure, our own sins and betrayals. There is where we will find him, and the joy and peace that only he can give.

So we are invited today, Palm/Passion Sunday, to see the Cross as a blessing, as a source of compassion, forgiveness and hope for all.