

5th Sunday Lent 2018

Next week is Palm Sunday. It is the beginning of Holy Week. It is a roller coaster of theology, history, solemnity, and passion.

Today the statues and crosses are veiled. The idea of veiling has its traditions that go back to the Holy of Holies in the Jewish temple where God Himself resided in the ark of the covenant. When Jesus died on the cross the veil was ripped in to. As if to say the mystery of God is now present in the person Christ. It's also why some woman choose to veil them self in church. It is a way to help them enter more deeply into prayer and direct their minds to God and it also reminds us of the unique holiness of women as they share in God's creation who bring new life into the world.

During these last two weeks of Lent we veil the statues and images in church to help us meditate on the awful suffering of Jesus and the horror of the cross. Holy Week touches all of our senses and emotions.

Next week for Palm Sunday we will not begin mass in the church. Weather permitting, we will gather (outside on the Bell Plaza, north side of the church, on your left for the 5pm and 8am)/ (in the gym which is in the Parish Activity Center on the south end of the campus by the cemetery) where we will have the blessing of the palms. After the blessing of palms, we will process, calmly and reverently, behind the cross, trusting that whomever sits in our pew, will benefit from our many prayers that have been offered from it. There are different reasons why Catholics have processions, but in general, a procession on earth symbolizes our procession into heaven. We, the baptized, a holy nation of priests, prophets and kings, follow the cross of Christ because it is what leads us into paradise.

The Palm Sunday procession re-presents the entering of the messiah into Jerusalem. The Jews expected Jesus to ride in on a great white war horse as the new warrior king David. They didn't seem to understand the significance of Him riding on a beast of burden, a humble donkey. Jesus was not and is not to be a warrior king but a suffering servant.

If we ever feel disappointed by Jesus it's usually because we have projected our own agenda on to Him, telling Him how it needs to be done, rather than learning how to follow him. Jesus wasn't what they expected. And He had a price on His Head. He knew he was riding into the city to be tortured and killed. But the majority of people, at least in the first part of the week, were all cheering Him on like a war hero, laying their cloaks and palm branches down for the donkey to walk on. Palm branches are a sign of victory. In the ancient world the victor received a crown of olive leaves and a palm branch for a scepter.

Today the palm branch is awarded to martyrs like John Nepomuk and Stanley Rother who finished the race by giving their life for the faith. So Jesus knew full well what He was doing and the message He was sending by riding a donkey. The message is that we are a people of servants and each of us must carry our cross in humility. I was trying to find a donkey for the procession next week. Not for me to ride on, but to demonstrate more clearly what Jesus was trying to get across.

There's a legend about why donkeys have the markings of a cross on their back. You'll notice that they have a black dorsal stripe that goes from mane to tail and a transverse stripe that goes across their shoulders making a black cross on their backs. The story goes that the donkey that was chosen for the triumphal entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, stayed near Jesus all during Holy Week. When Jesus was arrested the donkey followed close by even when Jesus was being whipped and tortured. The donkey wanted to carry Jesus' cross but they waved him off. So the donkey followed Jesus all the way to Calvary and when he saw this man, that was so kind to him, get nailed to the cross, it was too hard for him to watch, but he didn't want to abandon Him either so he just turned around with his back to the cross and stayed there with Him. The donkey didn't realize it but he was standing right under the shadow of the cross and so as a special blessing for his faithfulness of staying with Jesus, God left the markings on him and all donkeys as a sign of humility and faithfulness.

But faithfulness to what? What does it really mean to be faithful?

On Holy Thursday, just like we do every year in every Catholic Church around the world, twelve people are chosen to have their feet washed by the priest. We sometimes call it Maundy Thursday, or mandate Thursday since Jesus gives us a new mandate, to be the servant of servants, to be a servant leader.

Jesus was the master, he should be having HIS feet washed, which is why Peter refused initially. Jesus didn't just tell them how to serve others He showed them! I've invited pastors of other local churches along with some of our own parishioners to come on Holy Thursday to allow me the honor of washing their feet. I don't know if any of them will accept the invitation but I would ask for your prayers that we may become more united in our witness as servant Christians in this community.

And so at the end of Mass we will have a Eucharistic procession into the chapel to go be with the Lord as He goes to pray His agony in the garden of Gethsemane. We leave the church that night in silence. The Triduum has begun. The chapel will be open until midnight and conclude with Night Prayer which you are invited to join. On Good Friday we will come into a church with an empty church. We don't genuflect on that day. There is no mass, but there is a communion service and a reverencing of the Holy Cross. Again we leave in silence. The Triduum concludes with the Easter vigil Saturday night that begins in darkness, the new fire, that then by candlelight, spreads throughout the whole church, and then the great Liturgy unfolds with the exulted, readings, baptisms, Confirmations a high mass with orchestra and beautiful music.

So back to the question, what are we being faithful to? On Holy Thursday, Maundy Thursday, Jesus institutes the Eucharist, and the new and final covenant when he takes the chalice filled with wine and says, "Take this all of you and drink from it, for this is the chalice of my blood, the blood of the new and eternal covenant, which will be poured out for you and for many, for the forgiveness of sins, do this in memory of me."

The answer then is faithful to this new and eternal covenant. The old covenant was a blood sacrifice between God and mankind etched in stone. This new covenant is actually between Jesus and the Father. We belong to the covenant only when we are faithfully united with Jesus Christ. Through his blood we become members of the covenant. We share His life through baptism and the Eucharist, so that His blood is ours. As we are joined with Christ in sacramental signs, we must also be united in our faithfulness to the covenant.

That's what Holy Week is all about. Being faithful to that covenant means Bearing the shadow of the cross and Letting the blood of Christ become our blood. As we converge onto the last two weeks of lent - What am I faithful to? What's running through my veins?
