

Column031520

Companions on the Journey

March 15, 2020

Dear Friends,

(This column I posted last year. The subject matter is about the approach of Holy Week and the tradition of Palm Sunday, Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday night. I raise the question early enough to allow room to alter schedules and to make a decision to attend this year.) In a discussion a while back with some parishioners they indicated that they had never attended Holy Week Services. Not Holy Thursday. Not Good Friday. Not Holy Saturday. They never missed Easter but the three days leading up to Easter was not an experience they had ever had. Those three days are called the Triduum which is simply a word which means, Three Days, from the Latin language.

In the early years of the Catholic faith what circulated in and around Israel and then out through the Greek Isles and over to Damascus in Syria and eventually all the way to Rome was the story about the last few days of this Jesus of Nazareth. As a matter of fact before the various gospels were written there were collections of the passion account of Jesus. Often these accounts would begin with what happened on Palm Sunday with Jesus riding into Jerusalem on the back of an ass. Or donkey. The prophet Zechariah speaks of the King of Israel coming to his people riding on a donkey. Jesus was familiar with the passage. He knew that in the minds of the people that they associated this passage with the coming of the messiah.

By his choosing to enter into Jerusalem in this way Jesus was actually making a great statement without using words. This was a symbolic gesture that no one in Jerusalem would misunderstand. Jesus actually summoned his disciples to be there to welcome him. Thus the palm branches being cut down and laid on the path before the donkey were his disciples' way of pledging allegiance to this Jesus as the Messiah. And the people cried out "Hosanna in the highest. Hosanna to the Son of David." The reality of this event upset the religious authorities who felt that this upstart Galilean was threatening to bring down their carefully worked out arrangement with the hated Romans. There was all this political mutual back scratching between the religious leaders and the Roman procurator. The religious leaders surely saw Jesus as expendable and would have put him to death themselves but Roman did not allow the Jews the right to capital execution. That was reserved to the Romans as the conquering power. Only the Romans were going to decide who lives and dies.

Because of this, the religious authorities had to find a way to make it seem in Rome's best interest to execute this Jesus of Nazareth. The way they did that was to accuse Jesus of claiming to be the Messiah, the King of Israel and thus a competitor to the Caesar in Rome whose governor was Pontus Pilate. If Pilate allows an upstart King to become popular then the Emperor was not going to be pleased and Pontius Pilate was toast. (And aside: After Jesus death at Pilate's hands it was not too long afterwards that he was removed as procurator and

sent to another even more Godforsaken post where he managed to take his own life. A truly tragic end to a weak but ambitious man.)

The above is why we distribute palm on Palm Sunday/Passion Sunday each year. It serves as a reminder for us of who Jesus is and what he did. And so we bless palm and distribute palm and at the 11:15 Mass we process around the Church carrying our palm branches and singing what the people sang along the entrance to Jerusalem two thousand years ago.

Peace,
Msgr. McHenry