



The Holy See

CELEBRATION OF THE PASSION OF OUR LORD

HOMILY OF THE POPE JOHN PAUL II

Palm Sunday, 23 March 1997

1. *“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord... Hosanna in the highest!”* (Mk 11:9-10).

These acclamations of the crowd gathered in Jerusalem for the feast of Passover accompany the entry of Christ and the Apostles into the holy city. Jesus enters Jerusalem mounted on a colt, according to the words of the prophet: “Tell the Daughter of Zion, Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on an ass, and on a colt, the foal of an ass” (Mt 21:5).

The animal chosen indicates that it was not a triumphal entry, but that of a king meek and humble of heart. However the multitudes gathered in Jerusalem, almost unaware of this expression of humility or perhaps recognizing in it a messianic sign, greet Christ with words full with joy: “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!” (Mt 21:9). And when Jesus enters Jerusalem, the whole city is in agitation. People are asking themselves, “Who is this?’ And the crowds [say], ‘This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee’” (Mt 21:10-11).

This was not the first time that the people recognized Christ as the king they expected. It had already happened after the miraculous multiplication of the loaves, when the crowd wanted to carry him in triumph. Jesus knew however that his kingdom was not of this world; for this reason he had fled from their enthusiasm. He now sets out for Jerusalem to face the trial that awaits him. He is aware that he is going there for the last time, for a “holy” week, at the end of which the passion, cross and death await him. He faces all this with complete willingness, knowing that in this way the Father’s eternal plan will be fulfilled in him.

Since that day, the Church throughout the world has repeated the words of the crowd in Jerusalem:

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord”. She repeats it every day while celebrating the Eucharist, shortly before the consecration. She repeats it with particular emphasis today, Palm Sunday.

2. The liturgical readings present the suffering Messiah to us. They refer first of all to his sufferings and his humiliation. The Church proclaims the Gospel of the Lord’s *passion* according to one of the Synoptics; the Apostle Paul, instead, in his Letter to the Philippians, offers us a marvellous synthesis of the mystery of Christ, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross” (2:6-11).

This hymn of inestimable theological value presents a complete synthesis of Holy Week, from Palm Sunday through Good Friday to the Sunday of the Resurrection. These words from the Letter to the Philippians, progressively repeated in an ancient responsory, will accompany us throughout the *Triduum Sacrum*.

St Paul's text contains the announcement of the resurrection and glory, but the Liturgy of the Word for Palm Sunday concentrates primarily on the *passion*. Both the first reading and the responsorial psalm speak of it. In the text, which is part of the so-called “songs of the Servant of Yahweh”, the moment of his scourging and his crowning with thorns are sketched out; in the psalm the painful agony of Christ on the cross is described with impressive realism: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Ps 22 [21]:2).

These words, the most disturbing, the most moving, uttered from the cross at the time of his agony, today resound in loud, obvious antithesis to that “Hosanna”, which also re-echoes during the procession with palms.

3. For several years Palm Sunday has become the *great world day of youth*. It was the young people themselves who paved the way for it: from the beginning of my ministry in the Church of Rome, on this day thousands of them have met in St Peter’s Square. Over the years, the World Youth Days have grown out of this event, whose celebration has spread throughout the Church, in parishes, in Dioceses, and every two years in a place chosen for the whole world. Since 1984, these world meetings have been held at two-year intervals: in Rome; Buenos Aires, Argentina; Santiago de Compostela, Spain; Czêstochowa-Jasna Góra, Poland; Denver, the United States; and Manila, the Philippines. Next August the meeting has been set *for Paris, France*.

This is why last year during the celebration of Palm Sunday, representatives of young people from the Philippines handed over to their French peers the pilgrim cross of “World Youth Day”. This act has its own particular eloquence: it is a rediscovery as it were by young people of the significance of Palm Sunday, when they in effect take the lead. The liturgy recalls that “*pueri hebraeorum*,

portantes ramos olivarum..., “the children of Jerusalem ... carried olive branches and loudly praised the Lord: Hosanna in the highest” (Antiphon).

It can be said that the first “[World Youth Day](#)” occurred precisely in Jerusalem, when Christ entered the holy city; from year to year we are linked with that event. The place of the “*pueri hebraeorum*” has been taken by young people of various languages and races. All, like their predecessors in the Holy Land, want to accompany Christ, to share in the week of his Passion, of his *Triduum Sacrum*, of his Cross and Resurrection. They know that he is that “Blessed” One who “comes in the name of the Lord”, bringing peace on earth and glory in the highest. What the angels sang above the stable in Bethlehem on Christmas night, today resounds with a loud echo on the threshold of Holy Week, in which Jesus prepares to complete his messianic mission, achieving the world’s redemption through his Cross and Resurrection.

Glory to you, O Christ, Redeemer of the world! Hosanna!

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