

Brothers and sisters in Christ, Today is the sixth Sunday in the season of Lent. I'm sure you are already aware that today is a very important day in the life of the Church. It is important not because it is the last Sunday in Lent but because the Sixth Sunday in Lent marks the beginning of Holy week.

Holy week was just an ordinary week as far as weeks go. It began and it ended right on time. Just like the week before it and just like the week after it, it lasted seven days, Sunday through Saturday. In the scheme of things, it was just another week... just another 168 hours.

But understand Holy Week did not begin normally for Jesus and it did not end normally for Jesus. I would like for us to recognize the obvious tension between how it began and how it ended. I think the tension is obvious and given this tension I suppose you will not be surprised to learn that the sixth Sunday in lent is known by two names: Palm Sunday and Passion Sunday, Passion comes from the Greek word Pasco meaning suffering. As I said earlier, that is why there are so many suggested readings for this most holy day.

To be honest, it really does not matter which reading you pick for this Sunday. Surely it is nice to read about Palms on Palm Sunday, but even in John 12 the parade will ultimately end at the cross. You see, either way, by the end of the week our expectations will be challenged.

Yes it is true, the week began with a parade. The parade was a prelude of expectations. It was a parade filled with hope and joy. But the Parade was also a prelude to great suffering. Oh, it began with the crowd that sang hosannas, but it will end then that same the crowd cried out "crucify Him."

The truth is that this week which began with great expectations, will soon be dashed into pieces on Friday.

But this is not Friday, this is Sunday, so on this most holy day, let us go out to see Jesus. Why? Because just like them we too have heard about his signs and wonders. We have heard that he is a healer, that He has restored sight to the blind, and even more spectacular, He had raised Lazarus from the dead after being in the grave for four days.

Surely this man is the long-awaited deliverer. And so they lined the street with their Palm branches shouting “Hosanna, blessed is he who come in the name of the Lord.” Hosanna... it is a Hebrew word which means “to save.”

What the crowd is saying is that “our salvation has arrived. Blessed is He that comes in the name of the Lord.” The crowd is quoting directly from Psalm 118, but notice what they add to that verse. I find it interesting that the crowd added to this Psalm of assent the phrase “King of Israel.”

Can you imagine how politically charged that phrase would have been? They were not saying blessed is the king of Rome, but blessed is Jesus the king of Israel.

I cannot help but equate the event to what happened in 1 Maccabees Chapter 13. Understand we do not consider 1 Maccabees to be a canonical book. But that being said, it is a historical book and there is much we can learn from Simeon Maccabeus. In Chapter 13 He records that in 141 BC the Jews entered Jerusalem with Palms, and harps, chanting canticles because their revolt had succeeded and they had defeated their great enemy. At that time Simeon Maccabeus placed his son John on the throne.

Interestingly enough John the Apostle is the only Gospel writer to identify that the crowd was waving Palms... the point John is making with this reference to palms is that just like in 1 Maccabees, this is a politically charged crowd making a politically charged statement about Jesus... Jesus has arrived and we are here to claim his throne.

John records that the Pharisees said to one another, “See this is getting us nowhere. Look, the world has gone after him.”

The masses were full of enthusiasm. They were shouting out Hosanna. Blessed is the King of Israel. Can you even imagine what it would have been like to having been there to see Lazarus who had been raised from the dead... a leader with that kind of power... surely he could throw off the yoke of Rome. I imagine they expected to hear a call to arms. They expected him to restore Israel to the Davidic kingdom days.

To be fair, they were right. They had accurately connect the dots between Psalm 118, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” and Zachariah 9 “Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

To be sure, Jesus had come and He was their King, but He was an altogether different kind of king. I think the heart of the matter is that Jesus and the crowd had a very different understanding of his vocation and what it would mean for him to be their “salvation.”

Let us recall that in Isaiah 53, the prophet offers us the image of the “suffering servant.” Understandably, some understood this image of suffering to be the suffering the Messiah would inflict on the enemy. Jesus, however, saw it differently. He saw Himself as the servant who would suffer.

Jesus saw himself as the suffering servant in whom the long range plan of salvation would all culminate.

Jesus was sent to save, but He was sent to save us not from our fragmented political arena, but from our sins.

I suppose that troubled the crowd when they realized that Jesus was different than their previous expectations.

Can you see yourself in the crowd? We love to believe in a God that heals the sickness our relatives. The God that would never allow evil to come upon our households and the God that loves to keep America great. If you don't believe me, consider the prayers of the Church. We pray that God would intervene for our government almost every week. We pray that God would intervene for the sick every day. Now I'm not suggesting for a moment that these are bad things to pray for, on the contrary I think we should pray for all our needs, but what I am suggesting is that our expectations of Jesus might not be all that different from the people in our text.

I'd like to caution you against creating false expectations of Jesus. Jesus you did it for them, now do it for me. Isn't that what the crowd was saying? We are here because we have heard that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. Now, do that for us!

I love how John points out in Verse 16 that the disciples, and obviously the crowd, did not understand the events of Palm Sunday.

You see, their lack of understanding led them to expect a military messiah rather than a spiritual one.

Francis Schaeffer famously said, "Jesus did not come to bring us affluence."

It is easy to criticize the people in our text for getting it all wrong, but sometimes I think we forget who Jesus really is as well. Ultimately, Jesus is not just our personal miracle worker. Jesus is our savior... Savior from what? Our savior from sin.

Do you remember what John the Baptist said about Jesus at Jesus' Baptism? He said, "Behold the lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world."

Think about that. What John saw in Jesus will now come to its fruition during this Holy Week. By the end of the week Jesus will sacrifice himself as the ultimate Passover Lamb, but the Jews missed it. Sadly, what they wanted most was for Jesus to bring them the pleasantries of daily life.

Don't miss this as they did, Jesus did something far better than that for you. What did He do? He reconciled you to God.

Sometimes I think we spend all our time trying to get relief from the unpleasant circumstances of our lives. We want our problems solved. Our finances fixed, our health restored. We want Jesus to fix whatever it is that makes us unhappy with our lives.

Now those are all fair things to want and they are all fair things to pray for, but it did dawn on me that what I often want has much more to do with me than it does with His kingdom.

Jesus was sent to reconcile us to God so that we would be in his kingdom. Jesus became the ultimate Passover Lamb and Jesus saved you so that you might be part of his future kingdom.

My prayer for you as we begin yet another normal seven day week is that you see that there is nothing normal about Holy Week.

On this week every year Christians come to church to gather around a symbol of death. Why? Because we believe the man who died on it did it for us so that we might have life in his name.

Happy Palm Sunday. Hosanna in the Highest, Blessed is he who come in the name of the Lord.

In the grace of God, which surpasses all understanding, trust your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, Amen.