

Passion Sunday

April 5, 2020

Every year on this Sunday of the Lord's Passion, Saint John Paul would say in his homily "the curtain rises once again on the definitive drama of all history - the drama of men's redemption." This curtain rises to a triumphant scene, Jesus entering Jerusalem riding on a donkey accompanied by a great crowd waving palm branches and crying out "Hosanna to the son of David" thus fulfilling the prophecy of Zachariah "rejoice greatly O daughter Zion. Shout aloud O daughter of Jerusalem. Behold your king comes to you triumphant and victorious is he humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt the foal of a donkey."

However, what awaited Jesus was not earthly power and honor, but humiliation and rejection, suffering, and death. The priest and author, Henri Nouwen, while contemplating a 14th-century sculpture titled "Christ on a Donkey" wrote, "there is melancholy but also peaceful acceptance. There is insight into the fickleness of the human heart, but also immense compassion. There is a deep awareness of the unspeakable pain to be suffered, but also a strong determination to do God's will. Above all, there is love, an endless deep and far reaching love born from an unbreakable intimacy with God reaching out to all." This is the Messiah the crowd is following but they have no idea they are following him to his passion and death. They have no idea that his Messiah is the suffering servant, not the earthly conqueror.

But we today enter this procession knowing where it is going. We know the script of the drama of our salvation, yet we like Peter would sometimes like to rewrite it. Yet this is the only script written by God for the drama of man's salvation and in times like these, this script gives hope as it assures us of life and redemption following suffering and death. It is fitting that the passion is read today because it reminds us once again where this triumphant procession is heading, it reminds us of the fundamental orientation of our Christian life - the cross. The narrative of the passion shows us the true nature of Jesus' kingship and the implications for being his disciple. "If anyone wishes to come after me he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." For his is a kingship based on

self-gift, on selflessness and sacrifice, he is rejected because man prefers a life of self-indulgence, self-gratification and self-centeredness, a life without restrictions and sacrifice. In a Passion Sunday Homily in 2006, Pope Benedict XVI writes “we do not find life by possessing it, but by giving it. Love is a gift of oneself and for this reason it is a way of true life symbolized by the cross.” The Messiah we follow leads us down this road, the road of humility, sacrifice, selfless love of others even suffering as God may ordain. Sadly this road Christ leads us on is too often the road less traveled but it is the only road that leads to the peace he offers, the peace the world cannot give.

Today, on this Passion Sunday in countless hospitals, nursing homes, homes for the elderly, the poor and the homeless, men and women are giving themselves and even their lives for others during this horrible pandemic. Whether they know it or not, their self-giving actions have set them on the road that Christ has laid out for us and walked before us in his own total self-gift for us and for our salvation. May this present suffering and all suffering lead us through the drama of our redemption into the merciful arms of the one we meet on that road as he leads us by self-giving love through suffering and death, to life eternal.