

Palm Sunday

"Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus." (Phil. 2:5)

On Palm Sunday, we celebrate the kingship of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. We celebrate the dramatic moment of his triumph, as he enters Jerusalem, the Holy City, and all the children cry, *Hosanna! Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he that cometh, in the Name of the Lord!* He comes as the promised son and heir of David, the messianic king, *"meek, and riding upon an ass."* There is no mistaking the powerful symbolism of the occasion: the ecstatic multitudes acclaim their king, and cast garments and branches in the way, to make a royal path for him. The Pharisees demand that he dismiss this noisy crowd, but Jesus simply answers them, *"I tell you, if these should hold their peace, the very stones would cry out."*

"Hosanna to the Son of David!" It seems a moment of great triumph as Jesus enters the Holy City, and goes on to cleanse the temple at the city's heart. It seems a moment of great triumph; but how quickly is that moment overshadowed by the terrible events which follow. Jerusalem cannot accept this king. It cannot understand his kingship; it will deny him, and he will be crucified outside its gates. *"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, behold thy house shall be left unto thee desolate." "What shall I do with thee, O Ephraim? What shall I do with thee, O Judah? Thy love is as a morning cloud, like the dew that goeth early away."*

The whole business seems full of tragic contradiction. As Dean Crossman puts it in his lovely hymn:

*Sometimes they strew his way, And his sweet praises sing, Resounding all the day
Hosannas to their king; Then "Crucify" is all their breath
And for his death the thirst and cry.*

The whole affair seems contradictory. And today's liturgy mirrors precisely that contradiction. We sing that glorious and triumphal ninth-century hymn, *"All glory, laud and honour to thee redeemer King."* We bless and distribute the branches of palm, the symbols of his kingship; and then we read the Passion according to St. Matthew - that cruel and violent story of the condemnation of the just and innocent.

It seems such a tragic and painful contradiction. But in that very contradiction, there is a simple, and powerful, and all-important message, which sums up all the lessons of our Lenten season. The point is just this: The kingship of Jesus, true kingship, true liberty, true dignity, do not consist in worldly pomp and power, in worldly glory and ambition, nor in worldly grace and beauty. *"Lo, we have seen him without form or comeliness."* Stripped of all these things, *"spitefully entreated and spitted on,"* then - precisely then - he manifests true kingship. The ancient Passiontide hymn by Fortunatus makes that point with great poetic genius:

*Fulfilled is all his words foretold
Then spread the banners, and unfold
Love's crowning power, that all may see
He reigns and triumphs from the tree.*

"Are you a king then?" asks Pilate. Yes, he is a king. *"Thou sayest it."* Yes, he is a king. But kingship is not what Pilate thinks it is; not what the world thinks it is. Yes, he is a king: *"But now is my kingdom not from hence, if it were, then would my servants fight...but now is my kingdom not from hence."* The ways of God's Kingdom are not the world's ways, and the glory of its kingship is altogether different. Its kingship is the kingship of a servant, its liberty is the liberty of free obedience; its virtue is humility. *"Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus."* That is the essential message of this day.

In the events of Passiontide, there is a dramatic transformation of the very idea of kingship. *"He reigns and triumphs from the tree."* What is really going on here is a complete overturning of conventional worldly attitudes and understandings about true dignity and true worth. The lesson here has been present in one form or another in all the Scripture lessons of the Lenten season, beginning with the story of Jesus' rejection of his own temptations in the wilderness. Perhaps the lesson was especially explicit the Gospel where the mother of Zebedee's children, the mother of James and John, came to Jesus, asking him a favour: *"Grant that my two sons may sit, one on your right hand, and the other on your left, in your kingdom."* *"You do not know what you are asking,"* says Jesus. The assumptions behind the request are all wrong. *"The princes of the Gentiles lord it over them...but it shall not be so among you,"* says Jesus; *'it shall not be so among you.'* The ways of God's kingdom are altogether different.

"Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus." Those words of St. Paul sum it all up very precisely. "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus, who...took upon himself the form of a servant (the form of a slave) and became obedient, even unto death." In his word, and in his Passion, Jesus declares that the pomps of the world are vain, and our trust in them is ruinous. True kingship requires the rejection of all that, the casting out of all those worldly demons that possess our souls. "My kingdom," says Jesus, "is not from hence."

The signs of his glory are the signs of body broken and blood outpoured. "He reigns and triumphs from the tree." That is the glory we celebrate on Palm Sunday, and that is the glory we show forth day by day in the Church's liturgy as we break the bread and drink the cup. And that is the glory which must adorn our lives.