

032810 PALM SUNDAY

With Thanks To Fr. Robert Barron of Word On Fire Ministries For This Theme

Each and every year -- I think I learn... I relearn... I am opened to more of the beauty and symbols of this liturgical season in the Church. Soup suppers, stations of the Cross, covered statues... and today -- those who have been a part of Lent -- we have gone full circle: We started this season with ashes from palms traced on our foreheads... and now -- seemingly in reverse -- the Church gives us palms which were the branches waved at the Messiah as he entered the holy city. Yet we know Christ hasn't really entered into success and victory, but rather into sin and darkness.

I just received an email from a friend today -- she reminded that everyone is on a journey to God -- whether we know it or not.... whether we face it or not. Yet -- one significant aspect of Palm Sunday is that Jesus is willing to journey into this world. He's willing to come join the brokenness of Scribes and Pharisees... Jews and Gentiles... even the scandalous failings of his apostles and followers. Oh - and us too.

Judas shows us what it means to be dysfunctional. He betrayed Jesus for his love of money and desire for security. He didn't realize that he had a pearl of greatest value and wonderful security in Jesus. And in our world, most every family has its own dysfunctions... family members who can't stay committed to their marriage ... family members who cannot go a day with alcohol or sugar or gossip. Who among us hasn't betrayed our Baptismal innocence by a dysfunctional relationship in one way or another? Yet Jesus is willingly to journey into our hearts and minds today.

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And after a Passover dinner where Jesus tells his followers how very much he wanted to be with them... after he celebrates the first mass... he takes a couple of his closest followers and goes to a garden of peace and prayer. And what did his trusted friends do? They fall asleep -- reminding us of our sins of Sloth. Gosh no one talks about this sin... what is it? Sloth is being asleep in one manner or another when we are called to do something with Christ or for others.... Sloth is living our relationship with Christ and his Church on autopilot... just putting in time doing Sunday chores. Sloth is spiritual indifference to God... to His call to each one of us... Sloth -- the indifference of not getting off our behinds and starting to follow Christ with real zeal and enthusiasm... Sloth -- the response that says to Jesus, 'yeah, sure I'll do that someday.'

Can there be more worldly news that Christ enters into? Violence! His pursuers came after him with clubs and swords... Violence seeking the one who was total peace and goodwill. Jesus enters anger: tempers of a sinful humanity which say if it isn't done our way... let's lash out and intimidate those who are different. And here's a thought -- you remember the slave who was among those who came to seize Jesus? He had his ear cut off... a symbol of those who can't hear of finding peace and harmony. I won't listen to others so I won't have to find a way to bring peace here. I'll yell at my wife so she'll stop reminding me of something that is important to her...

Oh Lord Jesus: I won't leave you... not like the others... That's what some of his apostles might have thought. That's what some Christians of today

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It wasn't just a symbol but a real lack of courage and cowardice. I think about those men who were following Jesus -- and then I think of the men who say they are followers today. "I'll let my wife do the religious stuff... I don't want to act too churchy... let the women do the praying." How cowardly... who profoundly unmanly to slink into a pew like that.

And then, Jesus is before the Sanhedrin. They bring in false witnesses against Christ. We have many in our time who by word or deed do the same thing... Some are false or pseudo Catholics -- people who claim membership in His Church but they vote pro-choice and against life; some ignore pope or bishops. Jesus seeks to meet them this Passion Week as he shoulders the weight of their sins.

So there's a sort of review of what Jesus entered into in this week before his execution. He entered into it all -- at first to the sounds of Hosannahs -- but all too soon to the reality of human frailty.

How many of you saw the Mel Gibson movie The Passion of the Christ? So -- I'd say most of us from looking at the show of hands. There are some vivid memories that stick with me. One is how the Blessed Virgin Mary seems to almost 'float' through the passion. With great pain and an ache that none of us can truly fathom -- Mary is a nearby escort to her Son through all of his journey. And there is that scene where she gets close enough and Jesus talks to her... You see mother -- I make all things new!

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What in the world can that have meant? What should it mean to us? I'll come back to that in a moment.

The other image was the woman who played Veronica. She was an Italian actress in her early thirties. It may just be a guy thing - but I thought she was a magnetic beauty. Those who are of the world may look at Veronica and see a woman who simply had a crush on Jesus. For true believers, Mel Gibson's movie was showing us what happens when a heart is profoundly touched by the love and mercy of Jesus Christ.

About that Veronica woman in the movie, there is a real-life aspect of her that mirrors what happens with some of us. Did you know the actress was born into a Catholic family? She was but she had long ago stopped practicing her faith. At the time when they began filming, she was at a spiritual low point in her life. She explained later that she really wanted to believe, but she couldn't. One of her scenes in the movie is memorable.

Jesus is carrying his cross to Calvary, and he falls again and again. The crowds surge around him -- spitting and abusing him as he lies on the ground. The soldiers are pushing back -- trying to control the crowds.

Gliding into the middle of this confusion is Veronica -- she looks at Jesus with love and devotion. She kneels in front of him and says, "Lord permit me." She takes a white cloth and wipes his blood and sweat-stained face. She offers him a drink. It was a beautiful moment of intimacy in the middle of the violence and noise of the passion. The problem was -- it was difficult

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to film that scene. The crowd of actors pushing and shoving around the scene of Jesus and Veronica kept disrupting the moment of intimacy -- so they had to film it over and over and over.

It took something like fifteen or twenty takes -- filming again and again. Each time she had to look into the eyes of the actor playing Christ. And all of a sudden -- she felt something -- her heart started to melt inside of her. Then she found she was at the point where she was able to believe. The experience lit the flame of hope in her darkened heart.

Seeing a man near death... seeing the love of the gentle Christ -- the actress playing Veronica came to the point where she said, now I believe. But you have to be willing to have your heart exposed to the reality and the love of what happens this week... Everything in this week -- from palms and hosannahs -- to human frailty -- to death and resurrection... even the humble donkey that Christ rode on. And now -- now do we see what Jesus meant by entering into his passion and saying to his mother... You see -- I make all things new.

Have you let Jesus start to make you anew? Or are you like the actress -- lost in the fog of wanting to believe -- but not seeing that love and humility, gentleness, meekness and forgiveness are the ways of Christ? Pomp and rigidity and control remain the folly of those who still don't get it.

If you are a woman -- spend this week looking into the face of Jesus as he says to you, "See, I make all things new." What will that mean to you at the Resurrection? If you are a man - Jesus invites you "Put an end to your

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spiritual sloth. This Good Friday -- be willing to die to your old self, and rise
with me to a new life on Easter Sunday.”