

Palm Sunday
April 14, 2019

“As they left Jericho, a great crowd followed Him.” (Matthew 20:29)

Six-year-old Susan woke on Palm Sunday morning with a slight fever and cough, so mom decided to stay home with her. Dad and the rest of the family went on to church. When they returned later that morning, each of them was carrying a palm branch. Little Susan, a little frustrated and a lot curious, asked why. Dad explained that when Jesus came into town, all the people waved palm branches to honor him, so all the people at church this morning were given palm branches. Becoming more frustrated, Susan grumbled, “Awe shucks, the Sunday I’m sick and can’t go to Church, Jesus shows up.”

Like Little Susan’s dad, we all carried palm branches into the church today in remembrance of Jesus’ triumphant entrance into Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday. This signals for us each year the beginning of the week that changed the world. Then we read of His Passion that would follow, taking us from *“Hail Him to Nail Him.”* The story of His entrance causes me to wonder, “As He entered the city, did Jesus really see it as triumphant?” Or was He looking beyond the crowds, beyond the gate, to what He knew was about to happen?

His journey had begun a few days previously in the city of Jericho near Galilee, travelling about ninety miles to Bethany and Bethphage, then on to the Mount of Olives. Jesus began His journey with the twelve men closest to Him, but gradually the crowd of pilgrims grew. Matthew’s Gospel (20:29) tells us, *“As they left Jericho, a great crowd followed Him.”*

At the Mount of Olives, the celebration began. From here, Jesus commissioned His disciples to go into the city to prepare for them to celebrate Passover. From here, He ordered His disciples to go and find a colt that had never been ridden. It was here that the disciples placed their garments on the young colt and then sat Jesus on the lowly donkey for the two-mile journey into the city. The enthusiasm of Jesus’ closest disciples quickly spread through the pilgrim crowd. The crowds that followed, yearning for a great Messiah king, began to pay Him homage, waving palm branches and placing their garments on the road ahead of Him. This spreading of garments and waving of palm branches was all part of the tradition of homage to an Israelite king.

The people who dwelled in the city had little contact with Jesus previously. They had certainly heard of the prophet from Nazareth, but few considered Him of any importance in their lives. Scholars, like Pope Benedict XVI, believe that the crowd that payed Him homage on that first Palm Sunday, was not the same crowd that would, later that week, demand His crucifixion. This second crowd was almost certainly made up of the Jewish hierarchy and those in the city who unquestionably followed them.

Today, let us join the pilgrim crowd that celebrated the Messiah king that first Palm Sunday. Let us hold our palm branches, realizing that we are here to see Jesus’ triumphant entrance into our midst. In a few minutes, our Church will greet the Lord in our celebration of the Holy Eucharist, as we do at every Mass. Are we willing to take this journey through Holy Week, following Christ, not just to church, but in our day-to-day lives? Can we take up our cross and follow Him, even when we are scared, confused or frustrated? Which of the two crowds will we join today?