

Sunday 28th March, 2021 - Sixth Sunday in Lent - Year B.
Palm Sunday

Isaiah 50:4-9a
Psalm 31:9-18
Philippians 2:5-11
Mark 14:1-15:27

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

If there is one thing that today's Feast encourages us to think about, it is our faith and our belief, and whether or not the action that follows from this belief is authentic. Because if there is one thing that is clear to us from Jesus' life and ministry and from the Gospels, it is that the gospels require us to *follow Jesus*.

Palm Sunday is a wonderful story. Jesus and his peasant movement march on Jerusalem... and in a fabulously stage-managed entrance... and subverts all the popular expectations about God's way of doing business. It's a donkey not a war-horse. It's a cross not a throne. Life comes through death, not power and control.

Liturgically, the tradition centers on the *Procession* as the most important action of the day. And this is more than just a bit of child-friendly colour - the Procession is sacrament. It is more than a fond memory of a past event. Christ is present in this ritual... this is a place of encounter with God... this is an action through which people are touched and changed.

All around the world, churches will be enacting this ritual. In this action, this simple community-walk, we make our commitment public. We are members of the Jesus movement... we follow in his footsteps. Our belief in him and his gospel is a matter of action.

Of course not all Palm Sunday processions look the same...

A friend of mine spent time as a Priest in New York, some time ago, and he remembers the Palm Sunday procession as a wonderful thing to be part of. The procession around the large Manhattan block was 300+ people strong. And because Americans are a more overtly religious people than us, the crowds treated them with respect. Cars stopped to allow them to cross, and some bystanders even bowed their heads as they passed.

However, I have been in many a Palm Sunday procession - and perhaps you have also - that was very different! And sometimes I have thought we looked silly in a tragic kind of way. I felt embarrassed and couldn't wait to get back inside.

Most of us feel this way about our own personal procession. We feel embarrassed... ashamed about how badly, how inadequately we follow Jesus. Most of us feel that we are not faithful enough... not good enough.

And of course there's ample evidence to support such a judgement. We do stumble... we do fall... we do get lost... all the time. And even more embarrassing, we all know how ambiguous and faint-hearted our following is... how afraid we are... how we hang back.

If we were present at Jesus' entry to Jerusalem, we'd probably be one of the spectators... right at the back cautiously waving a palm frond... not too high, and not too exuberantly... sort of hoping that no one noticed. Sort of wishing we were out there with Jesus... but knowing it would be such a terrible risk.

We look at those who march with a purposeful and certain faith, and think they are the real Christians. Compared to them, we're an embarrassment... But most of the time we don't experience that degree of certainty and conviction. We're more likely to feel confused... uncertain... awkward... even lost.

Many of us look at our own personal following of Christ with a sense of shame.

But listen to the honesty of Thomas Merton. Now Merton was amongst the greatest spiritual giants of the 20th century, and these are his words...

“My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I do not do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.”

Even Thomas Merton felt lost and confused... unsure about whether he was really following God's will. He's brutally honest with himself... and if you listen carefully, you can hear the years of pain and struggle behind these words. But he comes to a point of decision. He chooses to live out of a simple principle... that he will try to do nothing that is not pleasing to God.

He doesn't expect or ask that he be given certainty. He accepts that he'll be as unsure as ever. But he's going to try and live out of this one simple desire - to please God - and he trusts that God's grace will carry him from there.

Are any of us doing a good-enough job of following Jesus? Are any of us confident that we live with sufficient integrity and justice... are loving enough in our relationships... good enough at home and at work? When we look at our own personal procession of life, most of us are doubtful.

But I think Thomas Merton is right... it's the desire that counts. Wanting to follow Jesus. Trying, even with tiny tentative steps, to get our feet walking in his footsteps. If we can only live out of this desire, God will do the rest... even if we ourselves are never certain.

So I encourage you... trust the desire of your heart. Choose and live out of that desire to follow in the way of Jesus. Take the small and obvious steps in front of you, even if you can't see far ahead. Make an intention to be faithful. Put yourself wholeheartedly into the procession, even if you are conscious that our offering is a bit shabby. And trust God's grace to do the rest.

Live out of the desire. Choose out of the desire. Make the commitment.

In the name of God. Amen