

## A reflection on Palm Sunday

This Sunday, traditionally known as Palm Sunday, begins the Church's celebration of Holy Week. Then on Holy Thursday evening we commence the celebration of the Paschal Mystery with the Mass of the Last Supper. It continues on Good Friday with the celebration of the Passion of the Lord and concludes with the most ancient tradition, the Easter Vigil climaxing with the Mass of the Lord's Resurrection.

Today our liturgy first commemorates Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem just prior to the celebration of the annual Jewish feast of Passover. He did so as "a meek and humble king," and was joyfully welcomed by the crowds as the long awaited Messiah, albeit while failing to grasp the nature of his Messiahship.

We too on this day rejoice as we ponder the full meaning of that event: Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem on his way to becoming the Saviour of the World through his Death and Resurrection. Then at today's Mass we have the reading of the Gospel of the Passion and Death of Jesus according to Matthew.

In keeping with the other Gospels, the physical brutality of crucifixion is not Matthew's focus. In fact, Jesus' crucifixion is recorded in just a few words, a subordinate clause: "*When they had finished crucifying him they shared out his clothing.*"

There was no need to dwell on crucifixion's details since the first Christians knew its terrifying barbarity. Matthew, rather, wanted to reassure them that the manner of Jesus' death, one inflicted by "the Romans on slaves, violent criminals and political rebels" came about "according to the Scriptures" – according to God's saving plan.

All four Gospels teach us that through Jesus' death, accepted and thus undergone in obedience to his Father's will, we receive life. Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life – the focus of last Sunday's Gospel of the

raising of Lazarus - and today we reflect that it is *through* his death that Jesus is the Resurrection and the Life.

John in his Gospel reports that Jesus taught this by drawing on the image of the seed that must be planted in the ground in order to bear fruit: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies it bears much fruit.” In Matthew’s Gospel the life-giving power of Jesus’ death is conveyed in the response of the Roman centurion and his colleagues to it. Those who executed Jesus were the immediate beneficiaries of his death.

Throughout his Passion-account Matthew especially emphasised the mocking of Jesus. The insults and jeering continued on Calvary. The soldiers took the leading role placing a placard over his head: “This is Jesus, King of the Jews.” The robbers crucified alongside Jesus, followed in turn by the chief priests, the scribes and elders, all, as it were, formed a “procession of taunters”.

But at Jesus’ death things changed. Coinciding with the tearing of the Temple veil in Jerusalem, at Calvary “the earth shook, and the rocks were split.” And Matthew records the pagan centurion and the other soldiers made a Christian profession of faith: “Truly this was the Son of God.” This was the same profession that Peter made earlier at Caesarea Philippi. At Jesus’ death we see anticipated the birth of a community of faith, the Church, made up of both Jews and Gentiles.

Palm Sunday can be our invitation to ponder the words of St Paul: “Christ died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died,” and in this way we too may be open again to Jesus’ gift of life gained for us by his death.

- Fr David Willis, O.P.

For a podcast of this homily, please go to [http://www.op.org.au/cal/pods/Palm\\_Sunday\\_Willis.mp3](http://www.op.org.au/cal/pods/Palm_Sunday_Willis.mp3)