

*Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who . . . emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, . . . And being found in human form . . . humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a CROSS.* Philippians 2:5, 7-8

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If you've ever been to a baby's first birthday party you've probably noticed the gift-wrap phenomenon.

You likely know what I mean: the way in which the wonderfully delighted and wonderfully delightful baby plays cheerfully with all of the bright and shiny wrapping paper and completely ignores the carefully chosen gifts.

I sometimes wonder how much money could parents and grandparents could actually save if they just wrapped up empty boxes in bright shiny paper?

I think that Palm Sunday can be a little bit like that for us.

We can easily focus on the palm crosses – maybe weaving and un-weaving them, maybe folding them, or holding them for a while before stuffing them into a pocket – and perhaps we think that this is point of the day.

It is called Palm Sunday, after all.

And yet, the palm crosses are really only the wrapping.

They are, as they were for Christ's oddly triumphant journey into Jerusalem, [they are] for us only the entry point into this week.

The point of this Sunday, which Christians for more than sixteen hundred years have marked with joyful processions of palms and branches,<sup>1</sup> is simply this: that, as we walk the Way of the Cross with Christ in these coming days, we might better follow Him each and every day of our lives with a livelier and a living faith: a faith that is transformed by re-living these days; a faith that, as a result, has the power to transform all of our days.

This is the week when we journey in heart and mind into the mystery of Christ's saving work, into the mystery of His death and resurrection: the story of God giving

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<sup>1</sup> Egeria describes the feast this way during her tour of the Holy Land in the 380s:

Accordingly at the seventh hour all the people go up to the Mount of Olives, that is, to Eleona, and the bishop with them, to the church, where hymns and antiphons suitable to the day and to the place are said, and lessons in like manner.

And when the ninth hour approaches they go up with hymns to the Imbomon, that is, to the place whence the Lord ascended into heaven, and there they sit down, for all the people are always bidden to sit when the bishop is present; the deacons alone always stand. Hymns and antiphons suitable to the day and to the place are said, interspersed with lections and prayers.

2. And as the eleventh hour approaches, the passage from the Gospel is read, where the children, carrying branches and palms, met the Lord, saying; Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord, and the bishop immediately rises, and all the people with him, and they all go on foot from the top of the Mount of Olives, all the people going before him with hymns and antiphons, answering one to another: Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord.

3. And all the children in the neighbourhood, even those who are too young to walk, are carried by their parents on their shoulders, all of them bearing branches, some of palms and some of olives, and thus the bishop is escorted in the same manner as the Lord was of old.

4. For all, even those of rank, both matrons and men, accompany the bishop all the way on foot in this manner, making these responses, from the top of the mount to the city, and thence through the whole city to the Anastasis, going very slowly lest the people should be wearied; and thus they arrive at the Anastasis at a late hour. And on arriving, although it is late, lucernare takes place, with prayer at the Cross; after which the people are dismissed.

<https://users.ox.ac.uk/~mikef/durham/egetra.html>

Himself, full and entire, for our salvation.

The story which we hear this day, and the Passion story that we will hear throughout the rest of the days of this week, is complete for us only when we listen not just with our ears but with our hearts.

And then, having both heard and listened, when we commit ourselves to living it daily.

That's when Palm Sunday and Holy Week start to be the days that they were intended to be: days that we enter into so that they might enter into us. This is a week to have our hearts re-formed in the shape of the Cross; to see how Christ empties himself,<sup>2</sup> in the bold words of this week's Epistle; of how he surrenders all of his glory and his majesty and his power that he might become as we are; and of how, having emptied himself of all of that, he then humbles himself to endure the horror and suffering of the Cross.

Palm Sunday is not a day for the faint of heart.

It starts out in celebration; but it ends in disaster.

We come in joy; but, if we take this liturgy, if we take this Service, seriously we go out in horror.

So for some, the temptation will be to just fast forward through the days of this week: to leave off this week with Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem and pick up next Sunday with the Resurrection: *All Glory, Laud, and Honour* straight through to *Jesus Christ is Risen Today*, without all of the messy stuff that comes in the middle.

But it's the messy stuff in the middle that makes this story so powerful and so real; and to give in to the temptation to skip all of that is to rob ourselves of the grace that can re-shape our lives.

Because the messy stuff in the middle is precisely what Christ comes to save.

Your messy stuff and mine.

So no matter where you may be and what you will be doing this week, whether attending one or even many of the services which have been scheduled; or sitting at your desk at work or at your kitchen table at home; in every place and in every situation, find some way to shape your week and your life in the pattern of the Cross, in the pattern of Christ's self-emptying grace; in the pattern of humility and sacrifice which we see in Christ this day.

This is the day that the Church bids us to leave behind our daily preoccupations that we might instead focus on the Cross; that we might devote ourselves to following Christ as he walks the Way of the Cross, that we might discover, just one week from now, on the other side of His death, humanity redeemed; tragedy defeated; and victory won; for us, in every moment of our lives, even (and especially) the messy ones.

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<sup>2</sup> ἀλλὰ ἑαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν μορφὴν δούλου λαβὼν, ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων γενόμενος, καὶ σχήματι εὐρεθεὶς ὡς ἄνθρωπος

**Κενόω:** from **κενός** (*Apparently a primary word; empty (literally or figuratively): - empty, (in) vain; to make empty, that is, (figuratively) to abase, neutralize, falsify: - make (of none effect, of no reputation, void), be in vain.*)