

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

Palm Monday?

This Sunday, we start the most important week of the year—Holy Week. And we begin by observing one of the most sacred feasts in the Church calendar.

But should we wait until Monday?

The good people at Wikipedia report that the feast that Christ was celebrating—the one that brought him into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, under the shade of celebratory palms—was traditionally observed during the month of Nisan. As the website explains:

“The Feast of Unleavened Bread always begins on Nisan the 15th. Passover was celebrated the evening before. If Nisan the 15th was a Saturday, then Preparation Day (Matthew 27:62) was Friday the 14th, or Good Friday. In any event, that would mean that the events of Palm Sunday actually occurred on Monday, being five days before.”

Be that as it may, whenever this feast should be observed, there are some fascinating customs associated with Palm Sunday around the world.

The Eastern Orthodox Church celebrates it the day after Lazarus Saturday (marking, of course, when Lazarus was raised from the dead). Northern European countries use pussy willow, because palms are unavailable. In Jordan, it is a festive family occasion. In parts of India, flowers are strewn about the sanctuary during the reading of the Gospel. (Evidently, this custom is related to a Hindu ceremony that includes the same gesture.) In parts of the Netherlands, crosses are decorated with candy and bread. In the Philippines, Christ’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem is re-enacted. A priest rides a horse and is surrounded by the congregation, bearing palms. Palm branches, called *palaspas*, are taken home after the Mass and hung beside, on or above doorways and windows.

But in this country, in this culture, it remains an event of comparative simplicity—but of great power and emotion. Palm Sunday helps to define our Catholic Christian identity. It is one of the few days in the calendar when churches are mobbed with people who might not otherwise attend Mass regularly. It is a feast when we express solidarity with one another and, by extension, with Christ, in His moments of triumph, and trial, and tragedy.

Jesus’ life and ministry are dramatically distilled into that one long Gospel reading. In Christ’s great arrival in Jerusalem, before Mass begins, we remember the joy of another arrival: His incarnation. In the scene at the Last Supper, we remember His selfless, sacrificial love. And in the trial and denial and betrayal, we see the ways that we have denied and betrayed Christ, too, in our daily lives.

This epic reading ends where next Sunday’s begins: in the silence of the tomb. We will spend the rest of this week prayerfully waiting, and reminding ourselves along the way of the key moments that defined this last week of Christ’s earthly life.

Whether Christ rode into Jerusalem on Sunday or Monday, the event we mark this day serves to remind us that His triumphal entrance was soon followed by a devastating death. What started with celebration ended with the ultimate sacrifice. But what we can’t forget, of course, is what was still to come. The triumph we witness this Sunday pales when compared to what will come next Sunday.

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