

## **"Jerusalem, the City of Peace"**

Homily of April 4, 2004

by Fr. Brian Joyce

---

If a visitor from another planet, or even another culture, joined us today he would probably say, "What are the palms all about? What's the deal with the palms?" In fact, to be honest, you and I might ask, "Now, what exactly are the palms all about?" Three of the gospel writers, Matthew, Mark and Luke would probably say, "What's with the palms?" They don't mention any palms. The only one who has palms in the gospel is John, in the last gospel. The palm tree, from ancient times, because of its great height and because of its graceful trunk, became the sign of elegant royalty. It was called "the princely tree" and it was a sign of victory.

Today we are listening to the gospel according to Luke, and on Good Friday we hear the gospel according to John. They have two different points of view, both of them equally true, but two different things they want us to understand. Luke reminds us that Christ stands among the poor and the persecuted and the dispossessed. He does not have Him arriving on a legionary stallion, but on a little donkey. It is as if President Bush were coming on a state visit to Sacramento, and he arrived not in a stretch limousine, not in a limo at all, but maybe in a Volkswagon Beetle or maybe on a bicycle. Luke has no palms, no sign of royalty or victory.

Now, John has a different thing to tell us which is equally true. He wants to remind us that this Jesus Who stands among the poor, the persecuted and the dispossessed is King of Kings, is Lord of the Universe, is royal and regal. And both of them agree, and so do the other two gospels, that, for His final days, for His most important work, Jesus goes up to and enters Jerusalem. Think of the title, "Jerusalem, salem, salem, shalom, Jerusalem, the City of Peace."

The City of Peace.... I went up to the city of peace, to Jerusalem, in January of 1995, with about fifty-five parishoners from here. We had been organized by Margo Schorno, our associate pastor at the time, and partially led by Dale Gilson, one of our parishoners. Both of them were to die within months of each other just four years later. We traveled up to Jerusalem from Jericho, near the Jordan River where it begins its steep decline down to the Dead Sea, the lowest point on the Planet Earth, 1325 feet below sea level. As we journeyed up to Jerusalem, Margo had a tape ready and she put it on when we came into sight of, on the horizon, the city of Jerusalem, the city of Peace. We all sang together, "I have fixed my eyes on your hills, Jerusalem, my destiny. Though I cannot see the end for me, I cannot turn away. We have set our hearts for the way. This journey is our destiny. Let no one walk alone. The journey makes us one."

And so we entered Jerusalem, the City of Peace. The first thing we saw was armed guards everywhere. There are even more today. Then we noticed teenagers, Israeli boys and girls,

walking hand in hand, hugging each other, kissing, but all of them on leave from the Israeli Army and, by military order, every one had a rifle over the shoulder, which was loaded and at the ready. We went to the western wall, the famous "Wailing Wall" in Jerusalem. There a sergeant was patting everyone down and shouting and barking at us in three languages, "No weapons at the wall. Check your uzis and sidearms here." .....Jerusalem, the City of Peace.

Then we visited The Mount of Olives that is talked about in today's gospel. It's a hillside just opposite the very gate where Jesus entered the city on Palm Sunday. The Mount of Olives is where He suffered the agony in the garden and was arrested at night. As we started coming down the slope, a native Palestinian approached us, trying to sell little crosses and statues, carved from olive wood from the Holy Land. That's how he made his living. That's how he fed his family. An Israeli soldier started shouting at him, telling him to get back and to get off of the road. Our guide yelled at him to stay away from us. When that happened, he became terribly angry and furious, and desperately started screaming at us like some wild-eyed terrorist. He was shaking his fist, and he was shouting at our guide and saying to her, "You weren't even born here. This is my land. This is my home." She reassured us. She turned to us and she said, "Don't worry. I have a gun in my purse and I know how to use it." Margo walked over to her and said, "Lillian, you keep that gun in your purse." And Dale stepped between us and, with empty hands and outreached arms, he embraced the Palestinian and, with the little Arabic he knew, he said, "Let's pray together." The fury and anger dropped away instantaneously and together, in Arabic, they prayed the Our Father.

Jesus the King who stands among the poor, the persecuted and the dispossessed enters Jerusalem the same way, hands empty, arms outreached, speaking to people's hearts and meeting anger and threats with nonviolence, with compassion and with love. And that is what we celebrate with palms today. We celebrate that true victory and true peace comes about, not by power and by violence, but by justice for all and non-violence toward everybody. If we are to wave palms in church and claim to be followers of Jesus we need to remember what kind of king we follow, a king not on a stallion, a king not in a limo, a king not armed. As citizens, as individual believers, as people trying to be disciples, Holy Week gives us an awful lot to think about.

An awful lot to think about..... We need to think about capital punishment and the victims of violence because this week the Innocent One who stands with and for all victims of violence is lawfully and legally and properly executed. We need to think about assault weapons, especially when we see the City of Peace, not to mention our own cities, armed to the teeth, and we get the assurance, "Don't worry. I have a gun and I know how to use it." We need to think about nonviolence as a way of life and as a policy for peace, as our Messiah and Lord suffers the ultimate violence with His final public words as a free Person before He is arrested. His final words to us are, "Put down your weapons. Those who live by the sword will perish by the sword."

Now, let me be very honest and clear with you. I am not a pacifist. Unlike some heroic modern Christians, like Dorothy Day, I am not a pacifist. But as a follower of Jesus with palm branches

in my hand, at the very least I must be committed to arms as a last resort, not arms as the second plan or arms as the third solution or arms as the fourth alternative, but arms as, when we have to sadly and honestly say, it is really our last resort. What a concept!

Like Dale in January of 1995 may we seek understanding, especially toward the poor, the persecuted and the dispossessed of our earth. And may we find ways to embrace each other and pray together to our God. May we become more faithful followers of Jesus the Messiah and more loyal citizens of the City of Peace. Amen.