

Homily: Palm Sunday, 5<sup>th</sup> April 2020

You might notice that we have a lot of palms decorating the altar this year – more than normal, it's fair to say. Normally, there would be far fewer branches around the sanctuary, because many of these branches would be in your hands. So today, as we celebrate this Mass, our entry into Holy Week, in a certain way you are all represented here by a palm branch, gathered around the Lord's altar. Every person who would love to be here today and can't is made visible by these branches.

When it was announced that the Pope would be celebrating the Holy Week liturgies without a congregation, the Vatican put out a statement which said that the Holy Father would celebrate the liturgy "without the physical presence of the faithful". I found the phrase helpful, because it reminded me that physical closeness is not the only type of presence. We can be present with one another in spirit, in our thoughts and prayers; we can be present by watching online; most of all, whenever we pray in union with one another, we are present to each other in Christ. He binds us in communion. So although we too celebrate the Holy Week liturgy without the *physical* presence of one another, there are many ways in which we are still gathered for these events which are at the heart of our salvation. The physical presence of these palms reminds us of the other ways in which we are all present before God and one another at this Mass.

The palms also point to the welcome Jesus received when He entered Jerusalem. The people thought He was coming to take over the city, to evict the Romans and liberate the people. He knew He was coming in order to die on the Cross. His death would, as we know, bring freedom – not from the Romans, but from our greatest oppressors: sin and death. The crowds welcomed Him with branches cut from the trees and by laying their cloaks on the road. They welcomed Him, as we do at every Mass: "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"

The Lord enters the Holy City – His city – the place where God dwells. But there is more – there is something much more intimate, much more personal, that is to take place. Away from the thronging crowds who acclaim Him as king, Jesus sends His disciples ahead of Him to a private dwelling, a home, to prepare the Passover meal which will be His Last Supper with them. He sends them to an unnamed man with the message: "My time is near. It is at your house that I am keeping Passover with my disciples." Who is this unnamed person? Who on earth did the Lord choose for the great honour of hosting the Last Supper in his own house?

This year, in these most unusual circumstances, that person is *you*. The Master says: "It is at *your* house that I am keeping Passover". This year, since we are not able to physically gather together in the Lord's presence, we can be sure that He comes to us in new ways. The Lord enters our city; He enters our homes; He seeks to enter our lives. It is at your house, at my house, that the Lord desires to celebrate the salvation He offers. How will we welcome Him? Perhaps not with palm branches or by spreading our cloaks on the road; but with hearts that are open to Him. With hearts that desire to receive from Him. With hearts

that will serve with Him at the Last Supper, grieve for Him on the Cross, rejoice with Him as He walks free from the tomb.

The liturgy of Holy Week has always allowed us to be present at things we did not witness in history. In this week, Jesus invites us to the Last Supper, to the foot of the Cross, to the empty tomb. Year by year we are present at these events. This year, the Lord wants to make these events present in our homes, to bring them right to the heart of our lives, because the life, death and resurrection of Jesus are not simply some ancient myth or some happy event in history: they are our salvation. They can touch every part of our lives, if only we allow the Lord in. Because of the events of this week, there is no situation without hope, no suffering which will not end, no final victory for evil or for death. Not in our world, and not in our lives, if only we allow the Lord in. So let's welcome Him with joyful hearts. Let the Upper Room be in your home, the hill of Calvary be in your home, the empty tomb be in your home. These events of salvation must touch every aspect of our lives, they must redeem every aspect of our lives. So let's bring them – let's bring Christ – to the heart of our lives this week.

In the final book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, the Lord Jesus says, "Look, I am standing at the door, knocking. If one of you hears me calling and opens the door, I will come in to share his meal, side by side with him. Those who prove victorious I will allow to share my throne, just as I was victorious myself and took my place with my Father on His throne." Today the Lord has entered the city. Now He knocks on our doors. Let's not leave Him outside. Let's open the door to Christ, and to the salvation He offers this week. If we do, the Lord promises to come and share our meal, our life, side by side with us every step of the way; and He promises that His victory this week will also be our victory; He will call us to share His throne in eternal life. So let's cry 'hosanna' and welcome Him joyfully today. Let's open wide the doors of our homes and our hearts to Jesus, in this week when His heart is opened so widely for us.

Fr Andrew

