

**Palm (Passion) Sunday, Year A** (homily preached at close of procession, before beginning the Mass)

We have just read the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. He was quite deliberately acting out a scene taken from Zechariah 9:9. The prophet Zechariah proclaimed his oracles in the years after the return from exile (520-518BC). He was encouraging his contemporaries to rebuild the temple, and, basing his hopes on his conviction concerning the fidelity of God, he held out the hope of a new Messianic Age. Some sixty or so years later others added to his scroll. They asserted that the new order promised in the past would come, but they would have to wait on God, for their only hope was in a direct divine intervention in history. Among other things they declared: 'Rejoice greatly, O Daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O Daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; righteous is he, and saved, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey'(Zechariah 9:9). They were echoing the vision Jacob had concerning the destiny of his son, Judah: 'The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and the obedience of the peoples is his. Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine'(Genesis 49:10-11). Such will be the dominion of this promised Davidic king that Judah will have no further need of military defence (see Psalm 46:9-10; Psalm 76:3), just as the king himself has no need of a war horse (see Zechariah 4:6). He comes in peace.

In his re-enacting this scene, Jesus is claiming to be the Messiah. The Gospel is charged with excitement, as the people jubilantly welcome their Messiah with words taken from Psalm 118, words chanted on the feast that commemorated the dedication of the temple. They are expecting God at last to intervene and liberate them.

As you know, the scene ends in a terrible anti-climax. Jesus found the religious institution symbolised by the temple to be not a vehicle of grace but a barrier to it. He was forced to empty it. This is our final chance as we begin Holy Week to ask him to cleanse away whatever in our hearts is a barrier to grace. More importantly, we are asked to take a good look at the institution of the church, especially as it is lived in our local community. Are we as a church an instrument of grace to those outside and a way of holiness for those within? If not, Jesus will have to do to us what he did to the temple.

The other anti-climax is that the crowd who welcomed Jesus with such enthusiasm became just as enthusiastic in calling for his crucifixion. That our following of Jesus might be more sincere, the Church asks us to listen today to the Passion Story. Surely it will move us to gratitude and love and a renewal of faith and commitment. As in imagination we walk the way of the cross with him let us hear him speaking to us (I am borrowing these words from Father Bede North):

'My friends – yes, that is what you are – my friends. My life was not complete till I crowned it with my death. You must complete my death with your life. Accept each moment as it comes to you with faith and trust. Do not look for me in empty tombs or far off places. I am in you. I am in your neighbour. I am in your home, your office, your factory, your schoolroom. Wherever you are, I am there with you. As you leave this church, take up your cross and follow me. Complete the way of the cross we have walked together today'.