

**HOMILY BY HIS EXCELLENCY
ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
PALM SUNDAY OF THE LORD’S PASSION
BASILICA OF THE NATIONAL SHRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

“Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and decisive direction.”¹

These words of Pope Benedict have often been cited by Pope Francis, who has expounded many times on the importance of the *encounter* with the person of Jesus. **Holy Week, which begins today, is a time to encounter Jesus during the events of his passion and death, so that we can find ourselves united with him in his resurrection.**

I invite you to do this. I invite you to *encounter* Jesus this week – at the various points along his journey into Jerusalem, to Calvary, and to the tomb.

Today we celebrate a feast with two names: *Palm Sunday* and *Passion Sunday*. Corresponding to these two names are two Gospel readings: the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, and the narrative of his passion and death.

Today’s feast presents a challenge: Are we willing to encounter Jesus on both sides of a paradox – as both *Victor* and *Victim*, as both *Savior* and *Suffering Servant*? Many people choose one idea of Jesus or another; but we are called to choose *the fullness of who he is, even when this involves tension and contradiction.*

Let us look at both Gospels of this “two-sided” feast and see if we can encounter Jesus in both.

The spokespeople for the first encounter are *the crowds* who surrounded Jesus as he entered Jerusalem. Throughout the Gospels, the crowds are the people who are “pressing in on Jesus” to listen to his words.² From the crowds, many people come forward to be healed. It is the crowds – including those who are “sinners”, the poor, the sick, people on the margins – who are most open to the words of Jesus, and most ready to accept his miracles as “signs” that the Kingdom of God is upon them.

Having listened, and heard, and seen, and *encountered* the man from Nazareth, they are now the ones who have become “evangelists” to others. When the people in Jerusalem are shaken, and ask: “Who is this?” the crowds answer, on the basis of their encounter with him: “This is Jesus the prophet.” This is “the son of David...who comes in the name of the Lord.”³

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* 1, 25 December 2005.

² cf. *Mark* 5:24; *Luke* 5:1; 8:42, 45

³ *Matthew* 21:9, 11

Isn't this also the witness that you and I can give? If we are Christian, it is because we too have *encountered* Jesus as one who has spoken truth into our lives and who has shown us the love of God personally. We are capable of being spokespeople for Jesus because his words and healings have changed our lives. Therefore, we acclaim him as "Lord" and we honor him as King. We want to share in the joy of his victory, just like the crowds who lined the road to Jerusalem.

But from the first Gospel reading to the second, a dramatic change occurs. From "Palm Sunday" we enter into "Passion Sunday". The experience of "triumph" is short-lived! As soon as Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, we are reminded of the words that Simeon spoke about him when he *first* entered Jerusalem as a newborn baby: "Behold, this child is destined...to be a sign that will be contradicted."⁴

It is interesting to wonder: what happened to the crowds when "Palm Sunday" turned into the Lord's Passion? How many of the people who had encountered Jesus as prophet and healer, and who hailed him as King as he entered Jerusalem, still believed in him when he had been arrested and condemned to death? How many who had lined the road *into* Jerusalem were also beside the road *out* of Jerusalem toward Calvary? How many were willing to encounter Jesus, not only in joy, but in sorrow?

This is the challenge of today's feast. It is true that Jesus is King and Lord. It is true that he is triumphant. But it is equally true that his triumph comes through suffering and contradiction. If we want Christ to give a new horizon to our lives, then we must be willing to encounter him both in joy and in sorrow, both in victory and in defeat.

And yet, my brothers and sisters, it is precisely by entering into this challenge that we discover deep consolation. After all, suffering and pain are inevitable. But when we look for Jesus precisely in those painful experiences, his presence gives suffering its redemptive meaning. When we seek to accompany Jesus in his suffering – which includes the suffering of our brothers and sisters in the human family – then we also experience how Jesus visits *us* in *our* suffering.

The tradition of Veronica – who is featured in the 6th station of the cross – is a beautiful picture of this. Veronica, unlike so many others, was willing to be present on the road to Calvary. She was impelled to comfort Jesus by cleaning his face of sweat and blood. And in the very act of comforting him, she was comforted *by* him. Both continued to suffer, but they suffered as one, in love.

This, my friends, is the mystery of encounter. When we limit Jesus and his Church to an idea, a philosophy, or an argument, we miss the point of *who Jesus is*. But when we see him in his full reality as a person, we are enriched. Not only are we enriched individually in our personal walk to holiness, but we are also enriched as a body: the members of Christ walking together in communion.

As we begin this Holy Week, let us look for Jesus not only where we are accustomed to seeing him, but also in places and in people where we have not seen him before. He is there, waiting to encounter us – and waiting to give our lives a new horizon and decisive direction.

⁴ Luke 2:34