

Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion, B – March 24, 2018 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 795 words

Our singing of “Hosanna!” and carrying of palm branches in joyful procession on this day – this solemn beginning of Holy Week – has ancient origins in the history of our forefathers, the people of Israel. We read, for example, in the Book of Leviticus, how they did a similar thing each year for the Feast of Booths, which generally falls in September. In Leviticus chapter 23 we read:

“[Y]ou shall keep the feast of the Lord seven days; on the first day shall be a solemn rest, and on the eighth day shall be a solemn rest. And you shall take on the first day the fruit of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days.”

The palms or other branches, then, are symbols of joy before the presence of God. As Christ enters the holy city as king we rejoice in his presence, but also in anticipation of his triumph – a victory not over political foes, but over the greatest enemies of the human race, sin and death.

Many of us will take our palms home and place them with our crucifixes. This pious practice should remind us of our joy over Christ's victory – especially whenever the cross comes near to us in the course of our daily lives, as it often does. We have the benefit of knowing how the story ends, of knowing that in spite of the apparent defeat and finality of Christ's crucifixion, there is life beyond it: he rose victorious and lives for ever. Yet, how often do we forget about that in the midst of our daily trials? We see only the pain, the suffering, the difficulty; we lose sight of the palm, so to speak. It is good for us to keep our palms in this way, placing them with our crucifixes. But let us reflect on what that combination of symbols means, and resolve to be more courageous whenever the crosses of this life find us.

Indeed, in addition to being a symbol of joy, the palm is a symbol of victory. That is why martyrs are often depicted in sacred art holding a palm branch. Theirs was an apparent defeat also, yet now they rejoice to see God in heaven, and the suffering and death of this world no longer has a hold on them. I was so edified to learn of the police officer, Arnaud Beltrame, in the south of France, who gave his life so that a hostage could be saved during the terrorist attack there this past Friday. He had prayed to the Blessed Virgin Mary three years ago during a pilgrimage that he would meet a girl whom he could marry; he was planning to marry her this June; they had been to church together this past Sunday; he was a man of faith and had his whole life ahead of him. Yet, he died in the hospital Friday night, having been anointed and given the apostolic pardon.¹ Why did he give his life as a sort of martyr of charity? Because he was a hero, for sure. But more than that. He knew that there was life beyond the sufferings of this world. His heroism remains and inspires us now. His fellow gendarmes are proud of him, proud of their own service. Surely his fiancée is proud also, even as she now mourns. Any sadness will give way, beyond the way of the cross that we undergo in this life, in the eternal Easter of heaven.

Our first reading, from Isaiah, was a prophecy of the Lord Jesus, who set his face “like flint” to go resolutely toward his crucifix and death. As we enter this Holy Week, we should set our faces “like flint” also, so to follow Christ resolutely wherever he leads us in this life. This is a week to accompany our Lord, to play our part in the procession, to keep vigil at the tomb, and then, finally, to rejoice at his rising. But this week is really a miniature of our entire life; if we meditate well on it we will gain new insights to help be more faithful going forward. Remember the symbolism of the palm and the crucifix – do not just focus on the pain, but see also the palm,

¹ All of this was related by Robert Cardinal Sarah on March 24, 2018 on his Facebook page, from a testimony of the priest who accompanied Officer Beltrame and his fiancée in their marriage preparation and anointed him as he lay dying on Friday, March 23, 2018.

the victory, the joy. Inspired by the recent heroic example of Officer Beltrame, and thinking also of the example of the Church's many canonized saints, my prayer this Palm Sunday is that we may all more faithfully and joyfully follow Christ now, so that we may not simply die with him, but also rejoice to rise with him into the eternal joy of heaven. Amen.