

Chapter 7



Palms: Symbols of Victory, Surrender, and Allegiance

“O Lord, grant salvation! . . . Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. . . . Join in procession with leafy boughs up to the horns of the altar” (Ps. 118:25-27 NAS).

Palms were used in Old Testament worship. Old Testament law (Zech. 14:16-21) directed that each worshipper entering the Temple during the seven festive days of the Feast of the Tabernacles had to carry a citron in his left hand and in his right hand a palm branch tied to myrtle and willow branches on either side. During the morning worship all the worshippers, including children, shook their palm branches toward the altar. On the seventh day, “that great day of the feast” (John 7:37) the priests made a procession around the altar seven times singing “Hosannah.” Thus, this day was known as “The Day of the Great Hosannah.”

Emblems of Victory

Apart from worship, palms were used as emblems of victory. When Simon Maccabaeus recaptured the citadel of Jerusalem in

142 B.C., "The Israelites entered it with praise and palm branches, and with harps and cymbals and stringed instruments, and with hymns and songs, because a great enemy had been crushed and removed from Israel" (I Macc. 13:51).

Palms were used also on Palm Sunday to welcome Jesus into Jerusalem as the Messiah-King of Israel. He had demonstrated His kingship by raising Lazarus from the dead. In fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, He entered Jerusalem, the City of the King, riding on an ass' colt. He was greeted with palms and shouts of praise: "Hosannah! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! The Son of David! The King of Israel!"

Prophecy Fulfilled

The Old Testament Scripture lessons, read at the vespers of Palm Sunday (celebrated on Saturday evening), refer to the kingship of the Messiah: "Shout, O Israel, be glad and rejoice . . . the king of Israel, even the Lord, is in the midst of thee: thou shalt not see evil any more" (Second lesson: Zeph. 3:14-19). The third lesson is from the prophecy of Zachariah (9:9-15) which was fulfilled on Palm Sunday. It reads in part: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion . . . behold, thy king cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass."

The hymns sung at the Matins or Orthros of Palm Sunday call on us to meet the King who comes to us on this day:

"Come, and with great rejoicing let us magnify Christ with palms and branches. . . . The Lord is God and has appeared to us; let us keep the feast together. Come, and with great rejoicing let us magnify Christ with palms and branches, and let us cry aloud. . . . We also, bearing palms and olive branches, cry aloud to Thee in thanksgiving: 'Hosannah in the highest, blessed is He that comes in the name of the Lord.'"

Blessing of the Palms

The following prayer is used for the blessing of the palms on Palm Sunday:

*"O Lord, our God, Who sits upon the Cherubim,
Who has raised up the might of Your Only-begotten*

Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, that through His Cross and Grave and Resurrection He might save the world; and at Whose coming today to Jerusalem, unto His voluntary Passion, the people who sat in darkness and in the shadow of death, taking the symbols of victory, and the boughs of trees and branches of palms, did go forth and proclaim the Resurrection, by anticipation.

Do You, the same Lord, preserve and keep us also who in imitation of them do bear in our hands palms and boughs of trees, on this Eve of the Great Feast of Pascha.

And like unto these multitudes and children who offered unto You "Hosanna in the Highest, Blessed is He Who comes in the Lord's Name," may we also in hymns and praise attain unto the Life-Giving Resurrection on the Third Day, in the same Christ Jesus our Lord, with Whom You are Blessed, together with Your All-Holy and Good, and Life-Giving Spirit, now and forevermore. Amen.'

It is important to remember that we participate in the messianic procession not only on Palm Sunday but also in every Eucharist where Christ the Messiah-King comes invisibly escorted by the Cherubim to unite Himself personally to each of us.

Symbols of Surrender

The icon of Palm Sunday shows children spreading garments on the road before Jesus. This reminds one of the twenty-four elders who cast their crowns before God's throne (Rev. 4:10). They were showing their submission and surrender. In ancient times a king captured in battle would cast his crown at the feet of the victor as if to say, "I surrender completely to you."



The branches carried on Palm Sunday were probably olive branches, common around Jerusalem. They symbolized peace, anointing, and victory. It behooves us to ask: What is the meaning of palms? Why does the Church bother to give them to us?

The meaning of these symbols is that Jesus comes to us today. Just as He entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, so He comes to us today in the Jerusalem of our souls. He seeks to become our personal Messiah and King. This can happen only if we offer Him our complete allegiance and surrender. Unless we surrender our lives to Jesus as Lord, He can never be *our* King. The palms are the sign of our glorification of Christ as King.

The History of Palm Sunday

The festival of the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem—which is one of the twelve principal feasts of the Church Year—began in Jerusalem, was commonly celebrated in the Eastern Church, and from there spread to the Western Church sometime between the sixth and seventh centuries, where it came to be known as Palm Sunday.

A beautiful description of how Palm Sunday was observed in Jerusalem in the fourth century is given by Silvia of Aquitaine. She visited the Holy Land as a pilgrim and described it in her Diary. The Christians in Jerusalem would re-live each year Christ's entry into the city as it originally took place. After the morning liturgy at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the faithful would gather at 1 p.m. in the afternoon at the Church of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives. With bishop and clergy present, as the faithful were gathering, hymns and psalms were sung. The Gospel story of the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem was read. After all had assembled, a magnificent procession began toward the walled city of Jerusalem following the path Jesus took. The procession consisted of young and old, bearing palms and olive branches in their hands, chanting hymns and psalms with the constantly recurring refrain: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." Even infants too young to walk, carried by their parents in the procession, held palms in their hands. Finally, at the end of the procession, followed the bishop with his attendants. In imitation of Christ, the bishop rode on a donkey. Winding through the city, the procession concluded at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre with the Service of Vespers. This age-old procession still takes place today on Palm Sunday with the Patriarch of Jerusalem and the faithful following the route Jesus took. This procession marks the origin of the festival of Palm Sunday with the blessing and distribution of palms.

Faith Is Surrender

The palms and branches of Palm Sunday must remind us that the Christian faith does not consist merely in believing a certain number of truths about God. It consists primarily in surrendering ourselves body, mind and soul to Jesus as Lord and King within the context of the Church. Paul Tillich said, "Faith means being seized by a power that is greater than we are, a power that shakes us and turns us and transforms us and heals us. Surrender to that power is called faith."

When a saintly Christian was asked, "What is the first thing in knowing the will of God?" he answered in a single word, "Surrender." You cannot know God or His will unless you first surrender your life to Him.

When Jesus called His disciples, He said to them, "Follow me." That was His will for their lives. Scripture says that they left all—their homes, families, friends, businesses—to follow Him. They *surrendered* all to obey the call of the Lord.

When the rich young ruler asked Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus asked him to surrender what he had and to follow Him—which he refused to do. The Gospel tells us that he left sorrowful.

Jesus confronts each one of us today and says, "I have done all I am going to do. I am waiting now for you to do something. I am waiting for you to empty your life of sin and self so that I can fill it. I am waiting for a fully surrendered life so that I can control it. I am waiting for a heart that is dead to everything else so that it may become alive to Me."

Refusing To Make the Great Surrender

We have a tendency to hold back. We make the small surrenders but not the great surrender, the one that can save and change our life. As E. S. Jones said, "The strangest thing on this planet is our fear of surrendering to the one safe place in the universe—God. We hug our present delusions, knowing deep down that they are delusions; but they are present, and we hug them for fear of the unknown. But that unknown is love. The earth when it runs away from the sun simply runs into the dark. When we run away from God, refuse to surrender ourselves, then we get one thing—the dark."⁴¹

A certain person converted and joined a small Christian church. Since they were not able to afford a custodian, every member was expected to take a turn cleaning the church. When asked to take his turn, the convert replied, "I'm converted but not that far."



That is exactly our problem. We are converted but not far enough. We have never made a complete, 100% surrender to Jesus our Lord. We are holding back. There are certain sins we have never surrendered, certain areas of life from which God is totally barred. As long as this is true, the palms we carry for Jesus on Palm Sunday are a mockery. He is not our true king.

Our Greatest Need

E. S. Jones has correctly analyzed our greatest need:

*"The problem in life is self-surrender. All else is marginal. . . . Why do we fly off the handle, get angry, blow our top? Because somebody has crossed our unsundered self. . . . Why are we jealous and envious of others? Because somebody is getting ahead of self. All of these outer sins are symptoms of something deeper. They are the symptoms; the unsundered self is the disease. These are the fruit; the unsundered self is the root. Don't fight these outer sins. Surrender your unsundered self, and when you do, these outer sins will fall away, like dead leaves. . . . Yourself in your own hands is a problem and a pain, but yourself in the hands of Christ is a possibility and a power. If you will surrender yourself to Jesus Christ today, you will find yourself again, no longer a problem but a power, no longer a conflict, but a conqueror. When you belong to Jesus Christ, life belongs to you."*⁴²

A person who had trouble with alcohol was asked to surrender his unsundered self to Christ. He did. The wife came back and said to the pastor, "Thank you very much for giving my husband

back to me again." The pastor replied, "I didn't give back your husband to you, he gave himself to God, and then God gave him back to himself and to you and to everybody else."

Your self in the hands of God is a possibility and a power. Your self in your own hands is a problem and a pain. Surrender to self makes life hell. Surrender to Christ makes life heaven. The more of ourselves we surrender to God, the more of our true self He gives back to us. This call to surrender is made time and again in the Divine Liturgy: "Let us commit ourselves, and one another, and our whole life to Christ our God."

Ohm's Law

There is a principle used in electricity that is called Ohm's Law. According to this principle, the amount of electricity flowing through a wire depends first upon the strength of the source of power, and, secondly, upon the resistance which is offered by the wire. If the source of power is increased, the flow of the current is increased, but if the resistance of the wire is increased, the flow of the current is decreased. This law is also applicable to our spiritual lives.

As Christians, the same God works in and through all of us. The power is the same, but the effectiveness of that power varies tremendously. Why? Because the resistance we offer to God varies tremendously. If we would only surrender our lives completely to God, offering no resistance to the Power, then God could work miracles through us. The world has yet to see what God can do with a life that is totally surrendered to Christ. Perhaps you can be that person. May the palms that you receive on Palm Sunday be an occasion for you to rededicate and surrender your life totally to the only true King—Jesus—to let His power flow uninhibited into your life.

The Obstructions

Many of us are like the inexperienced pilot who had to make an instrument landing on a cloudy day. The control tower said, "We are going to bring you in on radar." The pilot said, "That's fine." Then all of a sudden he remembered the tower, the telephone poles and the hills that surrounded the little airport, and he began to express his panic and concern about all the obstructions.

Finally, the flight controller, with a stern and authoritative command, cut in on the pilot's fears and said, "Listen, you just obey our *instructions*. We will take care of the *obstructions*."

Isn't that what God has to tell us at times? "Look, I'll take care of the obstructions. You just obey my instructions. Surrender your will to Me completely and I will lead you through the valley of the shadow of death to a safe landing at your destination."

The Difference Surrender Makes

Let me share with you a few examples of what surrender to God has meant in the lives of people.

When the angel of God appeared to Mary and told her that she of all the young Jewish women was chosen to bear the baby Jesus, she said in effect, "How? I'm a virgin." And the angel answered, "Instead of a man marrying you and you and him having this baby, the Holy Spirit is going to mysteriously overshadow you. The seed of this child will be put in your womb by the Spirit."

Now this is beyond human comprehension, even today. But this was Mary's response: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done unto me according to thy word" (Luke 1:38).

Mary was asked to do a hard thing, and sometimes God asks us to do hard things. But we can go ahead and do them if we know we don't have to do them by ourselves. We can depend on the Spirit of God to do them through us. And this is what Mary did. She simply surrendered herself to the Holy Spirit and said in effect, "Lord, just work through me. I want whatever You want to happen just as You say."

Mary gave herself to God as an empty vessel. And today we look on her as somebody really special because she did that. But when we give ourselves as vessels in whom the Holy Spirit can dwell and through whom He can work, then we are special, too, very special in God's eyes. "Whoever does the will of God," said Jesus, "is my brother, and sister and mother" (Mark 8:35). How can anyone be more special than that?

Someone said once that the Incarnation began and ended with perfect surrender to the will of God. It began when Mary said, "Be it done to me according to Thy will," and ended when Jesus said, "Into Thy hands I commend my Spirit."

A Total Surrender to God

Another example of total surrender to God comes from Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Speaking of the young “Sisters of Charity” who work with her to help the poor and dying of this world, she said,

“These girls wanted to give their best because in our Society (of the Sisters of Charity) we have to make a total surrender to God; this is the spirit of the community. They wanted to achieve this fulfillment in their own lives by giving all to God, giving up their position, their home, their future and dedicating all of it wholly to the poorest of the poor.”

If Jesus is God, as we believe He is, He deserves to be given everything we have, and these young Sisters of Charity make that kind of total surrender of their lives to Jesus. This is what the palms we carry on Palm Sunday should mean. “Hail Jesus! Hosannah! I accept You as my King and I surrender all to You.”

A woman who had struggled with cancer for ten years surrendered her life completely to God. She wrote:

“I was referred to cancer specialists at Johns Hopkins University. Every three months I went for an examination. I clearly explained to them, as I had to my previous doctors, that I put neither my life nor my fate in their hands, that I had a higher loyalty in my life—the Christ within me. My body was the temple of His Spirit. I belonged to Him and nothing—not even cancer could ever separate me from His presence.”

She placed her entire life first and foremost in the hands of Jesus—her King. There is a very special kind of inner healing and peace that comes from such surrender.

From “The Imitation of Christ”

The meaning of the palms we hold is best captured by this beautiful prayer from the great devotional “The Imitation of Christ”:

MY PRAYER

*“O Lord, Thou knowest what is best for me, let this
or that be done, as Thou pleasest.
Give what Thou wilt, and how much Thou wilt, and
when Thou wilt.
Deal with me as Thou thinkest good, and as best
pleaseth Thee, and is most for Thy Honor.
Set me where Thou wilt, and deal with me in all things
just as Thou wilt.
I am in Thy hand: turn me round, and turn me back
again, as Thou shalt please.
Behold, I am Thy servant, prepared for all things;
for I desire not to live unto
myself, but unto Thee; and O that I could do it
worthily and perfectly!”*