

# Palm Sunday Homily 2020

## Short homily

With the upending of routine and a retreat to our homes, it is easy to understand why some people feel like one day just bleeds into the other. Like the nightmare version of a good holiday, all days can begin to look the same. I saw one meme which had just given up on normal timekeeping, simply dividing the day into “Coffee time” and “Wine time”.

So, just in case this all sounds a bit too close to home(!), we have come to Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week. This is the week when we remember the last moments of Jesus’s earthly life and the revelation of his glorious life, moments which relativise all else in human history. They relativise history because now events can only be understood in relation to Christ and his sacrifice. His is the life that courses through the cosmos; he is the truth that binds the whole body together.

As Christians, this should be the focus of every moment. But especially in Holy Week, we should set aside some time to pray about these events. With that in mind, might I suggest the following. This week, read the entire Gospel of John. Get your Bible, count the pages of the Gospel of John, and divide the number by 6. Read that each day. And while you are reading, write down which words jump out at you.

Then, each day, after you have read your section of the gospel, sit and reflect. Pick an amount of time, perhaps 15 mins or half an hour, and spend the first third simply listening to what you have just read, reading over those sections that you have written down. After this, spend the next third praying what is in your heart, what you have heard in that first period of silence. What is really important at the moment. Who has come into your thoughts. Finally, in the last third, pray for the Church and for the world. Take what was in your heart, those people whom you wanted to pray for, and extend the insight more broadly, not forgetting those things that we must pray for at all times: faith, hope and charity.

This is just one way to prepare for Easter. If you prefer another, of course do that. But let us do something. Let’s not lose this time that God has given us to draw closer to his Beloved Son through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

## Long homily

The more things change, the more they stay the same. The hectic nature of the last few weeks all revolves around our fear of death. We are trying to protect from this sickness those who are vulnerable. We are also trying to avoid those horrific situations we have seen in other parts of the world where doctors have had to choose who lives and who dies, decisions that have traumatised so many. Finally, though death is certain for each one of us, we are trying to avoid lonely deaths, where families are kept from their loved one's last moments for the sake of the community. A terribly bitter sacrifice.

However, one of the blessings of being a priest is that you cannot avoid death. Though death has become increasingly taboo in our modern culture, funerals are part of our gig. Indeed, the Church places a huge emphasis on priests making themselves available at a person's last moments. Most things are put on hold when you get a call that someone is dying. Even the law of the Church, in any number of matters, has an exception "in danger of death". This is because Christ wants to be with those who are dying, and the Church should do everything in her power to ensure that the faithful receive the graces of the sacraments at this moment.

As you would be aware, this is an important part of my work. I am one of the priests on call at the Alfred for after-hours care. We get called when people are dying. So, in that sense, this week has been like any other. Now, there are obvious differences on site, like the line of people out the front waiting to be tested, or the lack of people in the foyer of Emergency during the night. Some of the hospital corridors, also, seem emptier.

But then there is a lot that remains the same. The heroic staff are still doing their jobs. The cleaners are still keeping things ticking over. The pastoral care team are still on hand. The station nurses still walk with me from the door of the ward to the patient, giving me details and helping me into the protective gear if needed. And finally, there is still a son or daughter of God, awake or not, about to die and face judgment.

This week I was called to Emergency. I arrived at the Alfred and spoke briefly with the family. I was then led through the corridors in Emergency, through all the doctors and nurses and other staff, to the bed of a woman dying. Later on, I thought of Christ's entrance into Jerusalem. But instead of palms, the people on either side had clipboards and IV drips. More importantly, instead of

focussing on me as the crowds did Christ, they were doing Christ's work of caring for the sick, spending themselves for the sake of strangers. Yet, still I walked through them, on my way to someone's Good Friday, bringing with me the good news of Easter Sunday, the sacraments, the Lord's tangible risen presence.

And when I arrived, the anxiety on the face of this child of God lessened somewhat, but I could see that she still wanted me to get on with it. So, I told her to think on her sins and to be sorry for them. She nodded quickly. After I gave her absolution and the apostolic pardon, we prayed the Lord's Prayer together. Since she was on life-support, she was unable to receive communion, so I anointed her. And at the end, when she was making the sign of the cross, her relief was obvious. I told her that, through Christ's gifts, she was the safest one in the room, but she already knew that.

Finally, whenever I am with someone who is dying, I always give them my spiritual business card. I tell them when they get to heaven not to forget about me and to pray for me. When I did this, she pointed above her head and said something I couldn't hear because of the respirator. When I leaned in, I realised she was asking me: "Can you see my halo?" She made both me and the doctor in charge burst out laughing. Now, I don't know where the image of halos comes from, but the light beaming from her face was obvious. Seeing the light, I made sure to repeat my name, and she gave me the thumbs up that she had it filed away.

This is the blessing of Easter. This is the real reason to cheer as Christ enters Jerusalem. He does not promise us victory on earth. He does not promise us that we will not suffer. But, he promises that these are not the final story. He promises us himself. He is with us anointing us, and also waiting for us. He has gone before us so that we are never alone, even in death. He has forgiven our sins, and poured himself out in love of us. And so we are safe. We are loved. We are in his hands. We too can approach death like we approach sleep after hard work, aware that on the other side is a day more glorious than anything we can imagine. This good news should make us all beam with joy, and confident no matter what the world throws at us, if we but stay close to him.

So, let us ask the Lord for all the blessings of this Holy Week. Let us renew our faith in the Son of God, who thought it worth his while to suffer and die on the Cross out of an unfathomable love for each one of us. And let us share this love, this good news with our brothers and sisters.