

PALM SUNDAY OF THE PASSION OF THE LORD (YEAR B)

March 28, 2021

Isaiah 50:4–7 • Philippians 2:6–11 • Mark 14:1–15:47

I.

I opened the door so that you can see it:
a stone from the Garden of Gethsemane, in Jerusalem,
where Jesus suffered his agony at the beginning of his Passion.

That stone was placed in the wall of the Cathedral near the entrance of the church,
in what was the original baptistery,
on the same day that the cornerstone was laid:
June 4, 1903.

Twenty years earlier, in the summer of 1883,
the fifth bishop of Richmond, John J. Keane (1878–1888),
had procured that stone during a pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

Around the stone there is a frame with the following inscription:
EX HORTO GETHSEMANI IN S[ANCTO] MONTE OLIVETTE.

“From the Garden of Gethsemane on the holy Mount of Olives.”

Both places—the Mount of Olives and the Garden of Gethsemane—
are mentioned in the two Gospel readings for today’s Mass.

First, from the beginning of Mass:

“When Jesus and his disciples drew near to Jerusalem,
to Bethphage and Bethany at the **Mount of Olives**,
he sent two of his disciples and said to them,
‘Go into the village opposite you,
and immediately on entering it,
you will find a colt tethered on which no one has ever sat.
Untie it and bring it here.’”

The Mount of Olives is the eastern edge of Jerusalem,
separated from the city by the Kidron Valley.

At the foot of the Mount of Olives lies Gethsemane.

We hear about this place in the Passion;
Jesus goes there with his disciples after the Last Supper:

“Then they came to a place named **Gethsemane**,
and he said to his disciples,
‘Sit here while I pray.’
He took with him Peter, James, and John,
and began to be troubled and distressed.
Then he said to them,
‘My soul is sorrowful even to death.
Remain here and keep watch.’”

In a sense, the Mount of Olives—
its peak at Bethphage and Bethany, and its base at Gethsemane—
frames the final week of Christ’s life.

Today’s Mass commemorates that entire week in one celebration.

First, Christ’s triumphal entry in Jerusalem,
which we recalled at the beginning of Mass.

Second, his passion on the outskirts of Jerusalem,
which we just heard in the account of the Passion.

And third, his resurrection,
because every Mass makes present the death and resurrection of Christ.

We almost feel whiplash as we commemorate the last week of Christ’s life:
the promising start with the adulation of the crowds;
but then, several days later, the crowds’ shouting that he be crucified;
and then his resurrection from the tomb.

What we are doing at this Mass is not a historical reenactment,
but rather a liturgical commemoration.

In other words,
the historical elements that evoke
help us to experience more deeply the paschal mystery
of Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection.

The Collect or opening prayer for Mass captures this meaning:

“Almighty ever-living God...
graciously grant that we may heed his lesson of patient suffering
and so merit a share in his Resurrection.”

The uniqueness of Palm Sunday is that it compresses the whole paschal mystery
into one liturgy.

That helps us to see the meaning of our lives.

It's as if we are standing atop the Mount of Olives,
and from there we can survey our lives.

Our lives have peaks, like at Bethphage and Bethany:
their triumphal moments.

But our lives also have valleys:
places of difficulty and suffering,
like at Gethsemane.

In either case, our lives have meaning because Christ has blazed a trail,
and we're meant to follow it—to follow him.

That's the meaning of those palms we receive today.

It's such a beautiful Catholic custom to give those palms a place of honor
in our homes,
usually tucked behind a crucifix.

The palms represent not only the branches that the people waived to greet Jesus
at his entry into Jerusalem,
but also—more importantly—the victory of his passion.

According to the magnificent imagery of the Book of Revelation, the martyrs in heaven hold palm branches in their hand (7:9).

As we go through life, whether its peaks or its valleys, we are confident that Christ has gone before us and is victorious.

We have a special token of that conviction in that holy stone in the Cathedral wall, which you can venerate after Mass, if you like.

“From the Garden of Gethsemane, on the holy Mount of Olives.”

That is where Jesus began his saving work.

That is where we find the meaning of our lives.

