

Palm Sunday.

"So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him crying, 'Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!'"

Great crowds went forth on this day to meet Jesus. They waved palms. Thousands of men and women shouted with joy, "Hosanna, blessed is He that comes in the name of the Lord!" They hailed Jesus as King. The news that He had brought Lazarus back from the dead had spread like wildfire. They cast their robes for Him to ride over. They sang. They ran. They strewed the ground before Him with wild flowers.

Today, we, too, shall be given palm branches. For just as Christ entered Jerusalem many years ago, so He will make a triumphant entry into our hearts this Holy Week and Easter when we receive His precious Body and Blood in Holy Communion.

The important thing this Palm Sunday is not that Christ entered Jerusalem many years ago, but that He comes to us today; not how He was received 2,000 years ago on this day, but how He will be received by us.

"Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. . .the King of Israel" (John 12:13). When Christ entered Jerusalem He was hailed as a King. When He comes to us today, shall we receive Him as our King? "I am a king," said Jesus, "and to this end was I born, that I should bear witness to the truth."

The King's Appeal.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem he used a method of action which many a prophet of Israel had used before. The prophets had often used the method of dramatic and symbolic action. Men might refuse to listen, but they could hardly fail to see; and again and again the prophets had cast their message into the form of some vivid action, as if to say: "If you will not listen, you can at least see." Jeremiah, for example, forewarned the Jewish people of the slavery that was to fall upon them, by making yokes and wearing them on his neck. Christ's triumphant entry into Jerusalem on this Palm Sunday was a deliberately made claim on His part to be King. The donkey, for example, on which Jesus rode was the beast on which kings rode when they came in peace; only in war did they ride upon horses. No doubt Jesus was remembering the prophecy of Zechariah which Matthew cites: "Behold your king is coming to you . . . mounted on a donkey." In that triumphant entry into Jerusalem Jesus, in a dramatic, symbolic action which spoke more loudly than any words, was making one last appeal to his people, and saying to them: "Will you not, even now, accept me as your Lord and King, and enthrone me in your mind, your heart and your will?"

"King of the Jews."

Even the inscription on the Cross: "Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews" — written in the three great languages of the ancient world: Hebrew, Greek and Latin proclaimed Him King. Each of these three great nations stood for three great contributions to the world: Greece taught the world beauty of form and thought; Rome taught the world law and good government; the Hebrew nation taught the world religion and the worship of the true God. The fulfillment and consummation of all these things is seen in Jesus. In Him was the supreme beauty and the highest thought of God. In Him was the law of God and the Kingdom of God. In Him was the very picture and image of God: "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself." All the world's seekings and strivings found their fulfillment and consummation in Christ. It was symbolic that in the three great languages of the world men called Him King: "Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews!"

Martyrs for the King.

When the aged Bishop Polycarp was brought to trial, the judge stood before him and shouted, "You are to renounce the faith! You are to curse the name of Christ!" St. Polycarp answered, "Fourscore and six years have I served Him, and He never did me wrong: how then can I revile my King, my Saviour?" The result was that Bishop Polycarp was burned to death in the amphitheatre in Smyrna. When the young church set down in writing what happened for future generations to know, it wrote: "Polycarp was martyred, Statius Quadratus being proconsul in Asia, and Jesus Christ being King for ever!"

Out of the persecution of Christians by Diocletian has come the story of Genesius, an actor who was playing a part in a burlesque on the rites and customs of the hated Christians. In the midst of the play, as though the Holy Spirit suddenly shamed him for straying from the faith of the Christian home in which he was born, he cried out, "I want to receive the grace of Christ, that I may be born again, and be set free from the sins that have been my ruin!" The surprised crowd saw the mock baptism that was being pantomimed turn into a hallowed moment of conversion as Genesius, fearlessly proclaiming his faith, cried out towards Diocletian, "Illustrious emperor, and all of you who have laughed loudly at this parody, believe me, Christ is the true King!"

Unmoved, except to fury, Diocletian ordered that he first be ripped with claws, then burned with torches, and finally beheaded. Before the end he was heard to cry: "There is no King except Christ, whom I have seen and whom I worship. For Him I will die a thousand times. I am sorry for my sins, and for becoming so late a soldier of the true King."

Not a Mere Symbol.

Someone said once, "Kings? Kings are only something to cheer for." He meant that the human heart loves parades, and that a king was merely a symbol. Christ is not that kind of King — a King we enclose in a decorated church with fragrant incense, stirring hymns and burning candles as if He were dead. He is a living King who says to us today, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." He is a King who challenges, who gives purpose and meaning to life; a King who forgives,

strengthens, and heals. "No man ever spoke as this man," they said of Him. "Who is this man that even the wind and the sea obey Him?"

He Becomes My King Through Commitment.

Christ becomes King personally and existentially to those who submit to His Kingship through commitment.

What do we mean by commitment?

A certain author wrote, "Let us not fool ourselves. We will submit to some master, whether that master is work, sex, pleasure, liquor, or what-have-you. Our problem is to choose which master. The only Master worth serving is Jesus Christ, the Master we were created to serve."

We can be captured by the cheapest and the lowest in life, or we can be captured by the highest and the best that human experience knows: Jesus Christ. He can fulfill life. He can light the lamp no darkness can put out.

When Christ enters our life, we must abandon the throne of our will, our ego, our pride, and allow Him to step up to this royal chair. He will increase; we shall decrease. He will speak; we shall listen. He will command; we shall obey.

Yes, some people will object, but will I not lose my personality if I commit my life to Christ? Does the violin lose its personality when a great master takes it and runs the bow back and forth across its strings? Of course not! It becomes a symphony. Our lives, too, become symphonies when we commit them into the hands of God.

What Makes a Christian.

Fr. John Meyendorff said once in a lecture to Sunday school teachers: "We are told in the Gospels that education implies a positive acceptance of Christ. This is the real conversion. This marriage does not take place at some time during the life of a Christian, he is simply not a Christian. We have a very clear statement about this in the tradition of the Fathers. What makes a Christian a Christian is this personal commitment to Christ. One's formal belonging to the Church through Baptism and other sacramental participation remains a mere potential if the individual commitment does not take place. The sacramental gifts of Baptism and the Eucharist and of all the sacraments are essential for an objective membership in the body of Christ; but again they are pure potentials if they are not taken seriously, and if a conversion of the heart and mind does not occur at some point in one's life."

When we were baptized, God said to each one of us, "YES, I accept you as my son or daughter." There must come a time in our lives when we must say to Christ, "Yes, Jesus, I accept you as my Savior, my Lord, my King, and I commit my life to You."

Committed Lives.

This is what commitment to Christ meant to former Governor Mark O Hatfield of Oregon, "I could not drift along as I had been doing; going to church because I had always gone. Either Christ was God, and Savior, and Lord, or He wasn't. And if He was, then He had to have all my time, all my devotion, all my life." This is what commitment to Christ should mean to us.

Tolstoy wrote, "I walked deep into the woods one day and there gave my life to the Lord. Suddenly the whole world came alive to me. All was new and different. I have come to the conclusion that God and real life are one and the same thing." Tolstoy discovered real life through commitment to God.

Ignatius Loyola was a soldier in the army of Ferdinand and Isabella in 1521. Severely wounded in a battle, he spent many months convalescing in a castle at Loyola. To help pass the time he asked for some books on romance. None was available, so he was given the lives of Christ and the Saints. These books changed his life. Instead of continuing in the service of an earthly king, he decided to devote his life to the service of his God and seek to win spiritual victories whose fruits would be everlasting. "Take, O Lord!" prayed Ignatius. "Take all — my liberty, my memory, my intellect, my will — all that I am and all that I have. You gave it all to me. I give it back again to You. All of me is Yours. Do with me whatever You will. Give me Your love and Your grace. That is enough for me."

Ignatius founded the Society of Jesus which has given the world many scholars and saints. He wrote a little book "The Spiritual Exercises" which became a classic. He achieved such eminent holiness that the Roman Catholic Church declared him a Saint. His profound influence on the world began with the personal and complete commitment of his life to Jesus as Lord and King!

Fran Tarkenton, Vikings quarterback, said, "My father is a minister and I have always been in and about the church, yet I had never felt that my life had any real direction or power until August, 1958, when I made a complete and all-out dedication of my life to Jesus Christ ... Until that time my faith had largely been something I had inherited. The confrontation with Christ made it alive, personal, powerful. There is quite a difference between a faith you accept from others and a faith you reach out for yourself."

Benefits of Commitment.

If we who live in the States wish to travel to England, we may choose to do so by committing ourselves to a carton box, but we will never make it. If we commit ourselves to an ocean liner, we will make it. So it is in life. Commitment to anything less than Christ is like committing one's life to a carton box. To commit one's life to Christ, on the other hand, is to commit oneself to the most powerful Person in the Universe, One who is "able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think;" One who is able "to save to the uttermost."

Commitment to Christ, says St. Paul, is our response to Christ for what He did for us on the cross: "He died for all that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for Him Who for their sake died and was raised" (2 Cor. 5:15).

Another benefit of commitment is expressed in Christ's words: "Whosoever liveth and believeth in Me shall have life everlasting," said Jesus. Not to all but only to those who commit their lives to Him — who live and believe in Him — does God bestow life eternal, life with God. In other words, Christ commits Himself only to those who commit themselves to Him. He cannot commit Himself to someone who does not want Him.

Buffeted by the trials of this world a certain Christian prayed: "Lord, tie me to something eternal. I tie myself to houses and lands and stocks and bonds and by some turn of fate, I lose them. I tie myself to a loved one and a single microbe comes and death snatches her away. I tie myself to a friend and the friendship vanishes. Lord, tie me to Your program, to service in Your Kingdom, to You, God, that I might be tied to the Eternal." Commitment is that which ties us to the Eternal!

If you make Christ your King through commitment, then you are the child of a King. He will let nothing — not even death — snatch you from His hands. He will give you power to be king of yourself and your passions. He will bestow upon you one day the Crown of righteousness. He will grant you life eternal and will make you heir to the greatest kingdom in the universe.

The significance of receiving palms today is to help us renew our commitment to Christ, to salute Him as Lord and King of our lives. May this be for us the meaning of the palms we receive today: a symbol of our personal commitment to Christ as Lord of our lives. For — let us remember — the first commitment was His. He first committed Himself to us, not part of the time or with half a will, but so much so that He went to the cross!

Adapted From the Sermons of Anthony M Coniaris