

A Reflection for a “Palm-less” Palm Sunday

In a more “normal” time, our church would have been fairly filled: A gathering, toddlers to senior citizens, holding on to green, leafy strips of palm branches on the threshold of Holy Week.

But this is April 5, 2020. Nothing much seems “normal.” Our churches are empty and quiet. Our minds are still trying to absorb the shock of COVID-19. And, our imaginations can’t help but wonder what the future will hold.

In the ancient Jewish world, palm branches represented victory and hope; a resilience that sustained the human spirit unto future victory. The crowds that welcomed Jesus in Jerusalem, while holding palm branches, were energized by hope. Little did they realize just how much their hope would be tested later that week.

So, Palm Sunday is meant to be about “holding on” to faith and hope even under the shadow of great crosses, in the face of suffering and sacrifice.

Few people cultivate “hope” alone. Like most virtues, hope and resilience are cultivated within a family, a community. Yes, “it takes a village,” even a parish.

Right now, we must all be apart. We must take this obligation seriously in order to save lives. But “being apart” doesn’t mean “being alone” without hope.

Our generation is blessed with all kinds of ways of “connecting” while being apart. Moreover, the Catholic liturgy teaches us to “hold on” to faith and hope even without the branches. The heart can “hold” what our sanitized hands, for the moment, cannot hold.

This might mean proactively connecting via phone or Skype or mail to one another. A daily conversation can be healing. Focus less on the grim statistics. Instead, recall the past trials and crosses we got through, focus on the good people are doing now, pray for the courage to live each day serenely, calm an anxious soul that is feeling overwhelmed.

One day we all look back on 2020. We will remember that on Palm Sunday we were “palm-less.” But we were not “hopeless.” Despite our crosses, our days were “grace-filled.” Each day was a classroom for learning, however difficult, about what it means to be resilient, holding on to hope as if it were a blessed branch of life.

We live the present moment looking to the horizon of Easter. As Christians, this is how we live and how we die. We remain the Body of Christ, connected in every way.

Peace-

Father Steven Labaire