

Palm Sunday 2007

In recent centuries, it was considered a bit of chivalry which a gentleman would perform for a lady: upon the encountering of a puddle, or perhaps some mud, to spread his cloak over said puddle so that the lady would not muddy her shoes, or soak her stockings. It probably fell out of favor after the lady was later asked for the umpteenth time, “hon, could you throw my cloak in the wash? It’s all muddy.” Even when chivalrous, guys are still guys. In all seriousness, gentlemen did do this, and it was long considered to be a sign of consideration and respect. The roots of the action go way, way back; to lay things before a person as they traveled forward was to create a path of sorts, and what one set before the one traveling the path indicated the amount of respect which was held for that person. In different accounts of the procession into Jerusalem, the people place both Palm branches, which they could have acquired from close-by plants, and in the account given in Luke’s Gospel, they lay their cloaks as well. The palm branches would have been a symbol of respect, showing the desire to pave the way for the king; the cloak symbolizes even more, for to set something that personal, that necessary for their comfort, that was to symbolically set before the king everything that they had. And such was the acclaim that Jesus received as he made his entry into Jerusalem: the people hailed him, acclaimed him, sang out his praises: this is he, finally: our Savior, our king, the one who will restore us to greatness. The one promised us for so long; he has finally arrived.

But it was not for acclaim that Jesus came as king, it was to accomplish the work of man’s salvation *which he alone* was capable of achieving. His desire was not to have cloaks or even mere palms strewn in his path, although he *would* challenge the world to set some things before him. What he desired was not necessarily more, but better to be set before him. He asked Peter to set before him their friendship, even warned Peter ahead of time that “before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.” He told Peter that he, Peter, and the other apostles would eat and drink at his table in his kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. He prayed for Peter’s strength; he treated Peter as his friend. But Peter, in this instance, was not up to the challenge: he did not lay down before Jesus on his way to Calvary his loyalty, his undying friendship, his love. He set before his king the shabby, worn and worthless cloak of denial of their friendship, more than that even, denial of even knowing him. He would not, in those dark hours of night, acclaim Jesus as his king, would not acclaim him as his Savior, would not acknowledge him as friend, would not even own up to having ever met him. As Jesus is taken off to his mockery of a trial, all he would ask of Pilate to set before him was fairness: what are the

charges, what had he done wrong? Could Pilate just say what it was that Jesus was being condemned for doing? And Pontius Pilate, who is quoted as saying “I find this man not guilty” and “no capital crime has been committed by him” and “what evil has he done?” set before the king his crucifixion—not because Pilate thought Jesus deserved it, but because it was expedient for Pilate. The people, too, have this opportunity to set what they have before the king; the very ones who cut down palm branches and even offered their cloaks to become the pavement upon which Jesus would trod, should have given him at least acknowledgment of his miracles, acknowledgement of the good he did for so many of them, healing their infirmities, restoring sight and hearing and health, even raising some of their dead. The people he encountered outside his trial would not do that; rather they cried out to crucify the one whom they saw work the miracles. They did not lay down their cloaks, or some palms; for all intents and purposes they withdrew them instead. And when they raised their voices to cry out “crucify him,” they might just as well have thrown shards of glass onto a path trod with bare feet; that painful must it have been for Jesus, who would withhold nothing to save us, to hear those words out of the mouths of the people whom he came to save.

The irony of Passion Sunday is that while we read about the people laying down palms or cloaks or whatever before Jesus, he is the one who is paving the path for us: he is placing things before us, and in doing so, is treating mankind like royalty. He sets before man himself, in the Eucharist, given to his friends at the Last Supper before his crucifixion, given to us at every Mass ever since, an offering for all people in all ages since. He lays down before us the pain which he endured for our salvation, pain which he endured to the very limits of human nature. He laid down his strength, so that we in our weakness could hope to overcome sin in our lives; he set down his humility, and was willing to be mocked and beaten and humiliated, so that we could go down the path to exaltation. He paved our path to salvation mostly, though, by laying down his life; so that our destiny could be diverted from the path of sin which leads only to death, and on to the path to life with him; and with his life, glory for us, even in our unworthiness. Our pathway now is not lined with palms and cloaks, but is paved—solid and safe—with those things that our king laid down for us.

So now, as we mark the beginning of Holy Week, the week during which we recall the events which led to our salvation, we can decide: with what will we line the path on which the King of Glory will trod in our lives? Today, we will walk out of here with palms—but remember, the people along the road to Jerusalem didn’t take them home,

they laid them down for Jesus. During this coming week, there is so much we can lay down before Jesus as tokens of our love and appreciation. There will be fasting and mortification we can do as a way of saying “thank you” to him. There will be opportunities to go to confessions, and have our souls cleansed and prepared to celebrate most fittingly Jesus’ resurrection. And we can set down in his path so many hours of the 192 hours which will comprise Holy Week from Sunday to Sunday: we can set before Jesus our time at the Chrism Mass, where we gather around our bishop as he consecrates the Holy Oils which will be used in the sacraments during the coming year; we can set before Jesus for a couple of hours on Holy Thursday, as we commemorate his institution of the priesthood, and ponder his last hours of prayer before his death; we can give him our time on Good Friday, as the Church celebrates in the most solemn way the day he died for our sins; we can give up our Saturday evening to be here as the Church celebrates the great event of his resurrection, and again on Easter morning greet our Risen Lord as did his friends first encounter him after his rising to glory. All of us will have to decide what to give; but none of us will be capable of setting too much before Jesus, who withheld nothing for our salvation, and who paved the way, through his pain and suffering, to our eventual glory in heaven.

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