

St John's Newport and St Stephen's Providence

LENT LECTURES 2019

2. Palm Sunday and Maundy Thursday Morning

Last week, I presented a thumbnail sketch of the Jerusalem origins of the liturgy of Holy Week. In the course of this I emphasised that even though the influence of the Jerusalem Church had led to a certain historicising or rememorative tendency in the development of the liturgy, the essential unity of the paschal event and its celebration remained of primary importance. In the three lectures after this one, I will be examining the three-day celebration we call the Paschal *Triduum*, that is to say the evening Eucharist of the Lord's Supper on Maundy Thursday, the Liturgy of Good Friday, and the Easter Vigil on Saturday night/Sunday morning. We will be exploring these rites and ceremonies in some detail but this evening I want to look at two celebrations which fall outside this bracket but nevertheless belong to Holy Week: the Palm Sunday Liturgy and what is known in ecclesiastical shorthand as the Chrism Mass, usually celebrated by the Bishop on Maundy Thursday morning or on a day convenient to him and his clergy.

When I was a young chorister, before many things were explained in confirmation classes, I was puzzled that the gospel reading for Advent Sunday in the Book of Common Prayer was Matthew's account of the event we think of as Palm Sunday, Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. I now understand that

it is there, of course, at the beginning of the Church Year, because it prefigures one of the great Advent themes: the entry of the Eternal King into the heavenly Jerusalem to take his judgement seat and inaugurate the new and eternal dispensation where his kingdom will have no end. It is an eschatological reference rather than an historical one. The manner in which the Palm Gospel performs this liturgical task on Advent Sunday, inaugurating the Church Year, to a certain extent reflects the way in which the procession of palms on Palm Sunday inaugurates the eventful week in which our salvation is accomplished. This latter celebration however, is rather more historically rooted. On Palm Sunday Christ rides in triumph into his city where later in the week, enthroned upon the rough wood of the cross, he will be lifted high *"to draw all men to himself."* Caught up in all this, each year the liturgy encourages us to join in this triumphal entry and to engage with everything that follows in the ensuing week. This, to my mind, is a little bit of genius.

Last week we met Egeria, the 4th-century Spanish nun, who is the primary source of our knowledge of the Jerusalem liturgy during the episcopate of St Cyril, and you may recall her description of an evening procession on the Sunday before Easter from which the first part of the Palm Sunday liturgy develops. She writes: *At five o'clock the passage is read from the Gospel about the children who met the Lord with palm branches, saying "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord." At this the bishop and all the people rise from their places*

and start off on foot down from the summit of the Mount of Olives. All the people go before him with psalms and antiphons, all the time repeating "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord." Everyone is carrying branches, either palm or olive, and they accompany the bishop in the very way the people did when once they went down with the Lord. They go on foot all down the Mount to the city, and all through the city to the Anastasis, but they have to go pretty gently on account of the older women and men among them who might get tired. Remember, too, that she describes this procession to her sisters back home because the custom is new to her - its not what they do back home. But what did they do elsewhere before the procession of palms took off?

We have a number of clues in the lectionary provision that comes down to us from a number of fourth- and fifth-century Churches. Then there is the so-called Gelasian Sacramentary, a crucially important, mid-eighth-century manuscript which is indicative of liturgical customs in Rome and Gaul before the reforms of Pope Gregory the Great. This source, compiled long after the many of the Jerusalem customs had taken root in the West, calls this Sunday *Dominica in Palmis, De Passione Domini* – Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord. The early lectionaries tell us that the solemn proclamation of the Passion narrative was the central and distinctive feature of this day, the Gelasian Sacramentary shows how this remained a significant feature of a liturgy now prefaced by a commemoration of the Procession of Palms. Moreover, we know that the great Passion sermons of St

Leo the Great, pope from 440-461, were preached on this day. In these he speaks of the "*indescribable glory of the Passion*" in terms of Christ's victory. So, we learn that what the addition of the Jerusalem innovation to the earlier, Passion-centred tradition did was to combine a celebration of the joyful entry of Christ into Jerusalem with the solemn proclamation of the Passion, thus underlining the Easter significance of all that follows in Holy Week. Palm Sunday celebrates Christ's triumphal entrance into the Holy City to accomplish the Paschal Mystery; in going this to his death he begins his passover journey, his return in glory to the Father. When I was young chorister, the first part of the service – the Palm Gospel, the Blessing of Palms and the Procession – was vested in red and the sacred ministers changed at the beginning of the Mass into purple. This too obviously separates these two liturgical actions which are essentially part and parcel of each other so it is good that in more recent reforms the colour for the whole service is red.

The *Common Worship* Palm Sunday liturgy which we use in England has an introduction, read by the President at the very beginning of the rite. It is a pity, in my view, that such a useful piece pastoral explanation does not appear in your 1979 rite. Our Church of England introduction stresses the fruitful relationship between the two elements in the rite and the importance of beginning Holy Week in the way we mean to go on. It says:

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, during Lent we have been preparing by works of love and self-sacrifice for the celebration of our Lord's death and resurrection. Today we come together to begin this solemn celebration in union with the Church throughout the world. Christ enters his own city to complete his work as our Saviour, to suffer, to die, and to rise again. Let us go with him in faith and love, so that, united with him in his sufferings, we may share his risen life.

In the great drama of our redemption, played out over the Great Week, Palm Sunday is the overture. To continue the musical analogy, I would say that the rite contains all that a great overture should contain: a flourish to gain our attention, a hint of the main themes and variations to come and a coda that engages us and compels us to go on. By participating in the rites and ceremonies of Palm Sunday we commit ourselves to following him "in faith and love" through to the end, to unite ourselves with him in his sufferings, that "we may share his risen life."

Now that we understand a little about the origins of the Palm Sunday rite and what it is intended to do for us, perhaps we should look a bit more closely at our current liturgical customs and, dare I say it, question some of the habits we have gotten into. The distinctive element in the service is called in *Common Worship*, as it is also in the Roman Rite, "The Commemoration of the Lord's Entry into Jerusalem." In your

Prayer Book it is called the Liturgy of the Palms. It should take place only before the principal Eucharist and consists of the blessing of palms and a procession together. In my view, which is that of most liturgical commentators, it is an abuse to separate these two parts either by blessing palms and distributing them at earlier or later celebrations or by omitting the procession altogether. The palms are blessed entirely in order that they may be carried in procession. To bless and distribute palm crosses at services other than the main one or separately from the procession from which they derive their meaning is to deflect attention from the ceremony and to risk debasing it to the level of the trivial, the sentimental or even the superstitious. As Thomas Cranmer warned in the prefatory material to the Prayer Book "*some (ceremonies) at the first were of godly intent and purposely devised, and yet at length (have) turned to vanity and superstition.*" The blessing and distribution of desiccated bits of palm leaf, woven into the shape of a cross, comes under this condemnation. Before the Reformation, real green branches of box, yew or willow were used in England and in parts of the country today branches with their spring covering of catkins are still known as "palm". These can be carried in procession as was the original intention and sprigs from them can still be carried home to decorate holy pictures or crucifixes.

So much for palms. The procession, whatever we carry or wave, is much more important as it is the first of the commemorative liturgical actions in Holy Week whereby – as I

have said already - we involve ourselves in and engage with the redemptive movement of Christ's return to the Father. Clearly, the procession must start outside the building in which the Eucharist is to be celebrated so that it can be seen as a solemn entry into the church, just as Christ made his triumphant entry into Jerusalem. This may be dramatic, rememorative, as with so many of the Jerusalem liturgical ceremonies, but it is not play-acting or make-believe to stimulate our imagination or intensify our devotion. Egeria makes no mention of a donkey - the bishop, in a city full of donkeys, walks down the hill with all the other worshippers. This ceremony, as with all the Holy Week ceremonies, is not designed to *impress* us but rather to *involve* us. The procession should be a real act of witness, it must involve the whole congregation - not just clergy, servers and choir walking round inside the building as in the days of my youth - and in it and through it we make a pledge of loyalty to Christ and express publically our determination to follow him along the *Via Dolorosa* of his sufferings to the glory of his resurrection. I think it should start a distance away from the church building, and all - young and old - should stop the traffic and *all* process "*pretty gently,*" as Egeria recorded, "*on account of the older women and men among (us) who might get tired.*"

Today, the Liturgy of Palm Sunday in the Episcopal and Roman Catholic traditions expresses clearly the essential balance between the rememorative and unitive celebration of the Paschal Mystery. By avoiding a distracting focus on details and incidents which might present a one-sided view of the

Passion in terms only of suffering it offers instead the very different insight expressed in the first recorded apostolic sermon – preached by St Peter in Jerusalem at the very beginning of the Book of the Acts (Acts 2:36ff): “*Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.*” The proper celebration of the Palm Sunday liturgy at the outset of Holy Week gives us a complete and rounded theological vision of the mystery of Christ. It is not a mystery of death alone we are going to celebrate this week but a mystery of life that triumphs over death.

Strictly speaking, the liturgical action at which we are now going to look stands outside the celebration of the Paschal Mystery but the rite is usually celebrated in Holy Week for practical reasons we shall soon appreciate. I speak of the *Missa Chrismalis* or Chrism Mass at which the Diocesan Bishop blesses and consecrates the Holy Oils for use in the administration of the Sacraments in his diocese in the year ahead. The rite appears in the Gelasian Sacramentary as one of three mass formulas provided for Maundy Thursday. The other two, incidentally, are the Evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper with which we are familiar and a Mass for the public reconciliation of penitents which has disappeared from use, at least on this day. But that is to anticipate. In what I have to say I speak of what is typical in a Church of England cathedral and I am not sure of what goes on here. In our discussion after the lecture perhaps we can examine Episcopal practice.

The background to the Chrism Mass is this. The sacraments of initiation, celebrated so appropriately in the early days of the Church at the Easter Vigil, required large quantities of Holy Oil for the all-over pre-baptismal anointing of the neophytes with the Oil of Catechumens and for their post-baptismal anointing or confirmation with the Oil of Chrism. The nearest available day for the consecration of these oils by the Bishop was the Thursday in Holy Week, Good Friday being clearly out of the question and Easter Eve itself a day when for theological reasons the Eucharist was not celebrated – a eucharistic *dies non*.

But there is more than a merely historical and practical justification for celebrating this rite on Maundy Thursday, there is good theology, too. At the Evening Mass that day we celebrate the inauguration of the New Covenant in the institution of the Eucharist and so celebrate the mystery from which all the other sacraments take their origin and towards which they are all directed. This is the mystery of the Body of Christ, which is at the same time the mystery of the Church and the mystery of the Eucharist. Thus in the celebration of the Chrism Mass as reformed by Rome in 1969 and formally adopted by the Church of England in the *Common Worship* provision of 2006 we find two centres of interest. The first is holy order - in the shape of a corporate renewal of commitment to ministry, seen in its proper context of the priestly nature of the whole People of God; and the second is the blessing of the

Holy Oils which are at the service, as it were, of the priestly and sacramental ministry of the Church.

The celebration of the Chrism Mass in the Church of England, once viewed with suspicion as an Anglo-Catholic fifth column activity, has come to be seen as one of the most important diocesan occasions of the year and this is as it should be. It is ironic that a recent Roman Catholic innovation, introduced by Pope Paul VI - the renewal of priestly commitment - has led to the broadening of its appeal. It is now a celebration of the common priesthood in Christ in which the bishop and his priests share and so it is good that the diocesan clergy are present in truly representative numbers to be with their bishop and to renew with him their ministerial commitment. The texts provided in *Common Worship* enable the clergy of a Church still divided over the scope of women's ministry to come together and express their unity in God's service in a way in which the Roman tradition of eucharistic concelebration at this service would not. Furthermore, the ministerial priesthood is an essential part of the royal priesthood of all the baptised, which it exists to serve and enable so the celebration should not be allowed to become an exclusively clerical occasion in the way a huge concelebration might suggest.

The second focus of interest is the blessing of the Holy Oils for use throughout the diocese in the year ahead. This is not unrelated to the matter of holy order we have just explored, as this element can also be interpreted on an ecclesiological level

as an expression of priestly solidarity with the Bishop who blesses the oil for his priests to use in the sacramental and pastoral ministry he has entrusted to them. The texts of the blessing prayers are rich and clearly expressive of their purpose and the ceremonial should be unfussy and splendid. The oils are carried into the presence of the Bishop by three deacons vested in dalmatics of purple for the Oil for the Sick, green for the Oil of the Catechumens which is the oil of new birth used at baptism, and white for the Chrism used in Confirmation, Ordination and the consecration of new church buildings. First comes the blessing of the Oil for the Sick as a medicine for the making whole of "mind, body and spirit." The power of Christ should be seen as active in the anointing of the sick, making present and real for them the healing he practised when here on earth. Next comes the blessing of the Oil of Catechumens with which those to be baptised are anointed before they come to the waters of baptism. The prayer implicitly links this anointing with the anointing of the Holy Spirit and recalls the ancient ceremony of exorcism as the oil is hailed as a defence in the "fight against sin, the world and the devil." Finally, the Oil of Chrism which is mixed with fragrant oil of flowers, is consecrated for use at ordinations, in post-baptismal anointing and confirmation and other rites such as the consecration of church buildings and bells. It is, in a sense, the oil of royal priesthood, akin to the oil used when the monarch is anointed in the coronation ceremony. It is the oil of priesthood in both the general sense – as used to set aside those incorporated into Christ's priestly people at baptism; and in particular – as used to anoint the hands of

those ordained to share in the ministerial priesthood of Christ. The prayer of consecration reflects both these themes in the context of the joy and gladness evoked by the fragrance of the oil itself.

I hope I have shown that the two celebrations of Maundy Thursday, the second of which, the Evening Mass of the last Supper, we shall explore next week, are linked theologically. In England, we witness to this link by presenting formally the parish's stock of the oils blessed in the morning at the altar at the beginning of the evening Eucharist. For those unable to be present at the Chrism Mass, this little rite emphasises the significance and importance of the Holy Oils. In England *Common Worship* provides texts for this and the ceremony is gaining currency in those parish churches where the oils are received and valued.