

National holidays are a typical event in the life story of any people. Every nation has at least one date when it stops and reflects on the way it came into being. We Americans have the Fourth of July and the French, their Bastille Day. Even each congregation has special days when they celebrate their founding, and those who sacrificed to make it possible. But earlier than any of these events, were the ancient Jews, and among their treasured and revered stories was the day of their liberation from Egyptian bondage.

Special days for the Jewish people had a dimension often over-looked by many. Their special days kept both the past and the future in focus. The past reminded them of a time of deliverance, while the future held up a vista of the realization of national and religious ideals. Past deliverances were signs of God's blessing – acts of God's favor – while the future called for fulfillment of the people's obligations and responsibilities. It was easy for them to say, "The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced." (Ps. 126:3), but the difficult part lay in realizing and fulfilling what God asked of them in return.

But let us not miss seeing how this idea has relevance to us and our way of life today. We Americans have spent over 2 centuries attempting to fulfill a national dream, but unfortunately, our accomplishments are largely material. It is easy to glory in all that we have produced, and it is equally easy to lose sight of what our purpose is. Why are we here? What is our mission? We have heard some of our country's earlier leaders respond by saying it is – Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness OR I have a dream OR We demand that our inalienable rights be provided.

Former president Reagan in his farewell message to the nation in 1989 remarked, "If we forget what we did, we won't know who we are...and that could result in an erosion of the American spirit." It is easy, on occasion, to rise to an emotional peak, but what about the next day, or the next year, or our future destiny? This raises the question of our mission as a people, and as individuals, and equally important – the price we are willing to pay to realize our TRUE mission and purpose.

Our lessons today indicate interesting parallels between situations which are centuries apart. There was the OT prophet, Isaiah, who was stirred by an unusual concept of mission in the 3rd Servant Song – whether it was a vision of his people – of himself – or some future messianic figure – we do not know – but he singled out attitudes and characteristics that would play a large and essential part in this servant figure. Listen to these words which describe a servant: I was not rebellious, I turned not backward. I gave my back to the smiters. And, I have set my face like a flint. And, I know that I shall not be put to shame for he who vindicates me is near. This servant's sense of mission quickened his determination, even though he was realistic enough to recognize that it involved paying a big price.

And then we skip over 7 centuries and come to the mission of Jesus, and we read phrases reminiscent of the Suffering Servant. Listen to the writers of the NT describe what a servant Jesus was: He set his face steadfastly to go to Jerusalem. And, if any would come after me, he said, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. And, I lay down my life for the sheep.

Today is the final Sunday in the Lenten season of the church year. It has been known primarily as Palm Sunday; but it is also Passion Sunday. And it is really both – for it blends 2 portraits of Jesus - The Jesus of Palms and the Jesus of Thorns. There is the Jesus we accept readily; and there is the one we need, but we find him more difficult and costly to follow. Let us be honest with ourselves. Are we not inclined to be like the crowd on that 1st

Palm Sunday? You know – excited over Jesus’ miracles of healing – his concern for the poor and underprivileged – his love for those whom sin had almost destroyed – and his personal popularity with the multitudes. These people in a quick flush of emotion were ready to crown him as their King.

Picture if you will, his entering Jerusalem that day. Remember that it was the nation’s capital, and he was seated on a donkey, and surrounded by throngs of the faithful, who were waving palm branches and shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” This is the kind of popular Jesus the crowd really wanted, but how taken aback they must have been when so soon after this he looked down upon the city and wept over it, saying, “Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace!” And then he came to the Temple, and in an angry sweep, he upset the tables of the moneychangers crying, “My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you have made it into a den of robbers!”

We, too, are fond of the Jesus of Palms. We talk and sing about the gentle Jesus, meek and mild - and the shy little Jesus boy – and the wooly Lamb of God. Artists have sketched the face of Jesus as soft and smooth, replacing rugged and robust features with anemic and pallid colors. Our Jesus is made into a pseudo-magician, who steps into the human situation whenever we get into a jam, and we tend to really appreciate this Jesus because it costs little to accept such a Savior.

But the sorry condition of our modern world demands that we say “Enough is enough!” The time has emerged for us to understand that this Jesus of the Palms is never fully adequate for the eternal mission to the world, AT LEAST UNTIL he becomes, for us, the Jesus of Thorns. That is, until we are ready and willing to go along with him, at the risk and price of the cross. Therefore, as we enter this Holy Week of 2020, we must accept the claims of his mission among us, and for us and for this purpose, he must become the actuating principle in all of our lives.

And so our situation is this: We can never understand WHO Jesus is or WHAT his mission to the world means, UNTIL we reconcile the Jesus of the Palms with the Jesus of Thorns. Only by our accepting this dichotomy in regard to WHO Jesus WAS and IS will we be able to witness to his wondrous and sacrificial life, and this is all the more needful because our world is full of people who are all too ready to TELL Jesus what his job is.

For example, there are the PEACE OF MIND type of people who think of Christianity as being merely a prescription to assure us of tranquility, or to provide a sort of emotional neutrality in which our harried souls can relax. Would not Jesus make short shrift of this point by saying, “I came not to bring peace but a sword.”?

Or, there are the IDEALISTIC type of people who say, “Well, after all, Jesus gave us a great ideal by which to live.” Once John Withers of Belfast, Ireland was discussing this type of person and remarked, “Never was there a century in which idealism was as high as today, yet humanity staggers in drunken incompetence from one calamity to the next.”

Or, there are the PROBLEM-ORIENTED type of people who declare that Jesus was the great problem solver, as if he were some sort of celestial mechanic who could be called down whenever our motor begins to sputter. The real Jesus, however - the Jesus of Palms and Thorns - was none of these. And if any of these had been the aim of his mission, it would not have been worthwhile for him to come at all.

If this Lenten season means anything at all to us, it should mean that we are making a serious effort to walk more closely with God. But we will miss out on its transforming significance if it becomes for us nothing more than a nostalgic waving of palms and shouting of alleluias. Emil Brunner said, “We can not live without God. But also, we can not live with God as long as our sins have not been removed.” Cecil Alexander, the hymn writer, joins us

here when he wrote this verse of a hymn, "He died that we might be forgiven. He died to make us good, that we might go at last to heaven, saved by his precious blood."

And Jesus himself knew, as he set his face like flint to go to Jerusalem, that before the crucial encounter between EVIL and the redeeming and reconciling LOVE of God would be resolved, it would inevitably take the shape of the Cross. His mission was to turn all of humankind from sin to good - from wrong to right – and from death to life. And the only way to accomplish this mission, was for Jesus to invest himself completely in the lives he claimed as his own. And when love goes that far, it defies verbal description, and it can only be symbolized by the Cross.

James Stewart of Edinburgh tells how the name of Bishop Hannington has always been linked with the 1st Christian mission in Uganda, East Africa. He was killed by the natives, but just when the emissaries of the African chieftain came to put him to death, he shouted, "Go and tell your king that I will open up the road to Uganda with the gift of my life."

This is the kind of life held up for us during this Lenten season. This is the way the divine love expresses itself. It reaches out to us through Christ forgiving and redeeming us, that we may go on to carry out God's mission to others. It is no mission for the weak. It is only for the strong who willingly embrace the Jesus of Palms, and then go on to commit themselves to the claims and example of the Jesus of Thorns.

Cecil Alexander sang further with this verse, "O dearly, dearly has he loved. And we must love him too. And trust in his redeeming love. And try his works to do." Friends, may the image of God's abundant and magnificent love for each of us be imprinted in our minds and hearts this week, as we focus on the precious gift given to us by the Son of God. And may we be enabled to respond out of love and gratitude, by reaching out in service to others. Amen.