

West Virginia – Western Maryland Synod

Bishop's Pastoral of *Palmarum* MMXX

2. Palm Sunday

(a) Services in the Churches.

On the next day, that is, the Lord's Day, which begins the Paschal week, and which they call here the Great Week, when all the customary services from cockcrow until morning have taken place in the Anastasis and at the Cross, they proceed on the morning of the Lord's Day according to custom to the greater church, which is called the martyrion. It is called the martyrion because it is in Golgotha behind the Cross, where the Lord suffered. When all that is customary has been observed in the great church, and before the dismissal is made, the archdeacon lifts his voice and says first: "Throughout the whole week, beginning from to-morrow, let us all assemble in the martyrion, that is, in the great church, at the ninth hour." Then he lifts his voice again, saying: "Let us all be ready to-day in Eleona at the seventh hour." So when the dismissal has been made in the great church, that is, the martyrion, the bishop is escorted with hymns to the Anastasis, and after all things that are customary on the Lord's day have been done there, after the dismissal from the martyrion, every one hastens home to eat, that all may be ready at the beginning of the seventh hour in the church in Eleona, on the Mount of Olives, where is the cave in which the Lord was wont to teach.

b) Procession with Palms on the Mount of Olives.

Accordingly at the seventh hour all the people go up to the Mount of Olives, that is, to Eleona, and the bishop with them, to the church, where hymns and antiphons suitable to the day and to the place are said, and lessons in like manner. And when the ninth hour approaches they go up with hymns to the Imbomon, that is, to the place whence the Lord ascended into heaven, and there they sit down, for all the people are always bidden to sit when the bishop is present; the deacons alone always stand. Hymns and antiphons suitable to the day and to the place are said, interspersed with lections and prayers. And as the eleventh hour approaches, the passage from the Gospel is read, where the children, carrying branches and palms, met the Lord, saying; Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord, and the bishop immediately rises, and all the people with him, and they all go on foot from the top of the Mount of Olives, all the people going before him with hymns and antiphons, answering one to another: Blessed is He that cometh in the Name of the Lord. And all the children in the neighbourhood, even those who are too young to walk, are carried by their parents on their shoulders, all of them bearing branches, some of palms and some of olives, and thus the bishop is escorted in the same manner as the Lord was of old. For all, even those of rank, both matrons and men, accompany the bishop all the way on foot in this manner, making these responses, from the top of the mount to the city, and thence through the whole city to the Anastasis, going very slowly lest the people should be wearied; and thus they arrive at the Anastasis at a late hour. And on arriving, although it is late, lucernare takes place, with prayer at the Cross; after which the people are dismissed. --- Egeria, c.380.

Brothers and sisters, once you get some years on you and travel around a bit, you begin to realize that things haven't always been the way they are. Of course, I am talking about liturgical practice, and, on this Palm Sunday, I can't help but muse upon Palm Sundays past, as social isolation is an inciting muse. Childhood Palm Sundays were, as I remember (keep in mind that this is some forty years ago), not communion Sundays. The special practice for the day included getting one's palms, but this was done by recession, not procession. That's right: we had a recession with palms. Toward the end of the service,

there would be some liturgical blessing of the palm. I don't remember the details, but I do remember getting up as if we were going to communion, coming to the rail, receiving our palms, and walking out. Do I remember correctly that this recession was done while a soloist sang Jean-Baptiste Faure's *The Palms*?

At college, Palm Sunday was greeted with pew-anchored balloons. It was a bit of a shock. A classmate, one who, unlike me, knew he was seminary bound, explained that this was a festive occasion and should have a party-like atmosphere. It was also the same year that I remember the Passion being read with different speakers, the congregation having appointed responses.

By seminary, I had been introduced to the Procession with Palms, something that had been included in the issue of the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978) but still unknown to me more than ten years later because it was buried in the altar missal and not to be found the pew edition. We sometimes forget that not every congregation readily adopted all the things that were included in the *LBW*, and not every pastor either cared for them or wanted to fight with his/her congregation to use them. Seminary training led me to include the procession with palms and the reading of the Passion in the congregational liturgies of my first call and, later, in campus ministry.

As much as it was a shock for me to see the balloons, I suspect that folks younger than I (and others who've known only congregations that were on the leading edge of the liturgical renewal movement) are shocked to hear that there has been any practice other than that appointed in our current worship book. Indeed, a fair number of pastors have been trained only in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, and there are very few left in the active ministry who remember *Service Book and Hymnal* (1958). So, as both an historian by training and an increasingly older person, I muse, and this musing, which began in my current confinement, leads me back to the consideration of today's Palm Sunday.

There is no pew-anchored balloon in sight, no dramatic congregational reading of the Passion, not even a warbled rendition of *The Palms*, indeed, no palms, at least not at my house (because we cancelled the order). So, we might very well think that this just doesn't feel like Palm Sunday. Pastors (and the ELCA Worship Office) have scrambled to find ways of providing something of Palm Sunday for the people. I fully understand the desire to maintain some sense of normalcy in this, but I find myself thinking, "This isn't normal." Besides, normal hasn't always been normal. In my own lifetime, I've known three normals.

I wonder: How did those Christians who lived (and died) during the Neronian, Decian, and Diocletianic persecutions, observe Palm Sunday? Clearly, by the time of Egeria's pilgrimage in the early 380s (*supra*), a procession with palms was well developed and established, but such practice would have been highly problematic during the persecutions. It may be that these fuller liturgical observances were developed after Galerius' 311 Edict of Serdica. After all, the thought of gathering outside the church building, blessing the palms, and then processing into the church, let alone a 1½-mile hike from the Mount of Olives to the Holy Sepulchre in broad daylight, seems a little more risky than breaking social distancing. My hunch: Palm Sunday did not always have, as my college classmate put it, a party-like atmosphere, and, even if they had had balloons, I doubt that they were in full display. I wonder: can we wrap our minds around a very different Palm Sunday than we have known?

Not only do those pre-Constantinian Christians come to my mind but also others like the Japanese Kakure Kirishitan, who were underground from 1620 to 1873. We still have brothers and sisters in foreign lands who go without the public trappings we associate with our high and holy days. We may be deprived of our processions because our Governors have said, "No public gatherings of more than 10 [5

if you are in Berkeley, Jefferson, or Morgan Counties],” but we have every expectation that next year will be business as usual. Even if this continues, we are not looking at 250 years underground or the threat of death for blasphemy.

What, then, shall we borrow from our brothers and sisters, who “in spite of dungeon, fire, and sword,” observed and still observe this day? We need borrow nothing of their liturgical observance, for already we have it in the words that they read on this day and we still do:

And the multitudes that went before, and that followed, cried, saying, Hosanna to the son of David: Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest.
(Mt. 21:9, KJV)

“Hosanna” is the thing! “Hosanna” sung in our congregations at every mass! “Hosanna” sung by Egeria in the midst of pomp and procession! “Hosanna” read in the midst of a secret assembly! Oh, we take it to be little more than an exclamation of joy. We take it alongside “hallelujah/alleluia” and “amen” as one of those Biblely words. We may have learned the meaning of it way back in fourth-grade Sunday School but haven’t given much thought to it since. We sing it every time we celebrate the Eucharist, assuming we use something akin to the standard liturgy, but we consider not what we sing.

This thing that the people shouted as Jesus entered Jerusalem was already deeply rooted in their collective consciousness. Not quite half-a-year before, during the rites associated with Sukkoth, they had gone in procession, as they had done for generations, carrying palm, willow, myrtle, and citron, reciting Psalm 118 with its two verses,

אָנָּא יְהוָה הוֹשִׁיעָה נָּא אָנָּא יְהוָה הַצְּלִיחָה נָּא :
בְּרִיךְ הֱבֵא בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה בְּרַכְנוּכֶם מִבֵּית יְהוָה :

Save now, I beseech thee, O Lord: O Lord, I beseech thee, send now prosperity.
Blessed be he that cometh in the name of the Lord: we have blessed you out of the house of the Lord. (Ps. 118:25-26, KJV)

Please, O Lord, save now! Please, O Lord, make prosperous now!
Blessed be he who has come in the name of the Lord; we have blessed you in the name of the Lord. (Ps. 118:25-26, Tanakh)

“Wait,” you say, “Where’s the ‘Hosanna?’” It’s there. “הוֹשִׁיעָה נָּא,” transliterated as “hosia na,” is translated as “save now.” While the Septuagint’s translators saw fit to take the psalm’s Hebrew word and render it in Greek as “σῶσον,” the Evangelist opted to merely transliterate the shouts of the crowd when Jesus arrives, rendering it as “ῶσαννά,” and English translators of the Gospel, opting to follow the lead of the Evangelist, rendered it as “hosanna.” Still, the meaning is the same: Save now!

Luther, in his commentary on Psalm 118, directly connects Ps. 118:25 with the Gospel, writing, “Here we have the Hosia Na which the people sang for the Savior when He rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. This verse and the following were taken from this psalm on that occasion.” (LW 14:101) It is, however, Luther’s exposition on the “na” of hosia na that moves us from a simple cross-textual reference to the emotional core of the text: “The נָּא added to it sounds a prayer and indicates the heart’s desire. We

would say in German: ‘Help, O dear one, help, do help!’ As the ‘O’ and the ‘do’ indicate the heart’s desire to persuade Him whom we beg, so the אָנָּה functions in Hebrew.” (*Loc. cit.*)

Luther, perhaps reveling in the thought of Palm Sunday, says that v.25 “is a prayer or a wish of joy, as when we wish someone good luck and success as he undertakes a new venture or receives something good.” Others have pointed to the possible use of “hosanna” as an exclamation when petitioning someone of authority, e.g., the king, as he passes by. Indeed, this would make sense given the proximity in the Gospel text to the term, “son of David,” a royal title.

It is the raw meaning of hosanna, however, that seems more appropriate today than the balloons of college or even the palms of our common practice. It is the raw meaning that my pious imagination would link up with our brothers and sisters hiding midst persecution, in times past and present, and even ourselves, hiding, as we are, from the current plague. Luther writes, “The kingdom of Christ must suffer much adversity from the devil, the world, and the flesh, and always stands as if it were about to fall and perish, as the fierce tyrants gain the upper hand. Against these attacks, however, these words stand firm: הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא, הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא, הוֹשִׁיעָה נָא! Help, help, help!” (*Op. cit.*)

My brothers and sisters, in this present time, a time of hiding, a time of fear, a time of sickness and even death, recollection of not only Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem but also of this particular word shouted by the crowd, recollection of its raw meaning well-suited for a raw time, may prove meet, right, and most salutary. A fervent plea to the one who saves shall be on our lips, sometimes with shouts, sometimes with barely a whisper. It may just be, once this time passes, that we will gather and sing again the *Sanctus* and *Benedictus qui venit*, reckoning for a moment when that word took on new meaning for us. We may even realize that every day is the right day to sing it. For the time being, may it be on our lips and in our hearts, that blessed cry: HOSANNA! SAVE NOW! As Luther says, “No one else will sing it for us.” (*Op. cit.*)

✠ Riegel