

Homily for Palm Sunday

Over these 40 days of Lent, you may have heard the hymn *Were you There?* – the great spiritual, first sung during the days of slavery in the American south, when the slaves would find deep comfort and strength as they compared their own trials and injustices to those of Jesus. The words are sung: “*Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*” And these lyrics got me thinking: “As much as we imagine those events happening, is it actually possible for us to “*be present*” during Jesus’ passion?” I mean, just today, we waved palms in the air just as the crowd welcoming Jesus in Jerusalem did 2,000 years ago. And this coming Thursday, we’ll celebrate the memorial of the Last Supper, while on Friday we’ll come to venerate a cross like the one Christ Himself died upon.

Now, certainly we know, as we recite in the Nicene Creed each weekend, that Jesus was “incarnate of the Virgin Mary...crucified under Pontius Pilate...[and] that he suffered death and was buried”. After all these *are* factual, historical events that happened, and therefore, they are clearly unrepeatable. So, of course we know we can’t celebrate Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem again. Of course we know we can’t be present at the Last Supper, or at the trial before Pilate, or even at the crucifixion of Jesus on the cross. Of course we know this. But as someone wisely once said about these holy days we are now entering – what we celebrate during Holy Week is not so much history, but rather mystery.

My friends, this is why we gather together over these days of Holy Week– not so much to be taken back to the past; but rather, to remember and to celebrate what happened in the past, in order that it might have a real and lasting effect in our lives in the here and now. It’s a back to the future if you will.

And what does that mean? Well, in our very long Gospel today, Jesus says the following words to the 12 Disciples at the Last Supper: “This is my body, which will be given for you; do this in *memory* of me.” Now, we’ve heard that phrase countless time at Mass. But, what you might not realize, is that that word, “memory”, is actually a translation of the Greek word, *anamnesis*, which literally means “to remember back” – but in the sense of actually "making present" once again in the here and now.

Take another example to make it a little clearer. In today’s same Gospel, while Jesus is on the cross, the good thief says, “Jesus, *remember* me when you come into your kingdom.” Now, if all that word *anamnesis* meant was to recall a past memory, then the good thief would’ve simply been saying: “Hey Jesus, when you come into your kingdom, have some good thoughts about me as I’m suffering down here.” However, by *anamnesis*, what the good thief was really saying was: “Jesus, when you come into your kingdom, remember this poor suffering soul, and make me there present with you in glory.” And that’s just what Jesus promises. He says to the good thief, “Amen, I say to you, today you will be *with me* in Paradise.”

My friends, by taking part in the events of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection this Holy Week, we're not just "play acting these things out." Rather, when we celebrate these historical events in the coming days, we enter into an act of anamnesis – of, yes, remembering what happened; but even more, through the sacred mysteries of our liturgies, God truly *makes present* now for our salvation and the salvation of the world what actually happened then. And so, through the power of the Holy Spirit, let us enter into this Holy Week, *remembering* what Jesus did, so that this same Jesus can still do what He first came to accomplish. God bless you.