

LOOKING THROUGH STAINED GLASS



A Column by Fr. Tom



Why Palms?

When we introduced this year's Lenten meditations, we expressed our hope that we might be able to look at the customary practices of Lent in a new way, a way that would bring us to the Heart of Lent. In the weeks since that first Lenten column, we examined Ashes as a sign of our reliance on God – for our very lives – so that we might re-focus our lives on our relationship with God this Lent. We also explored the Lenten disciplines of Fasting, Prayer, and Almsgiving, and discovered how they help us to improve our relationships with God and others. These signs and practices of Lent help us to get to the Heart of Lent.

However, there is one more sign of Lent that can help us to get to the Heart of Lent, and that is Palms. As we look forward to Palm Sunday next week, and the beginning of Holy Week, we can look at the significance of Palms and hopefully come to a better understanding of this special feast day in our Church.

When we explored the significance of Ashes, we talked about how they remind us of the earliest Scriptures and the story of Creation. When we explore Palms, our first thoughts might turn to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, but, as the title of this column suggests, "Why Palms?" For the answer to that question, we need to turn even further back – to the Hebrew Scriptures, to the time of the Maccabees nearly 200 years before Christ.

The Maccabees were a Jewish family and sect that took back Jerusalem and the Jewish Temple from the Greeks (technically the Seleucids), who had captured it just a few years before. In two separate cases, the Palms were used as signs of victory: "The

Jews entered the citadel with shouts of praise, **the waving of palm branches**, the playing of harps and cymbals and lyres, and the singing of hymns and canticles, because a great enemy of Israel had been crushed." [1 MC 13:51, emphasis added] and "Carrying rods entwined with leaves, **beautiful branches and palms**, they sang hymns of grateful praise to [God] who had successfully brought about the purification of his own place [the Temple]." [2 MC 10:7, emphasis added]

So, if Palms are a sign of victory, what was the victory they were celebrating when Jesus entered Jerusalem? Perhaps this celebration was in anticipation of a great victory – Jesus' victory over sin and death. "They took palm branches and went out to meet him, and cried out: "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, the king of Israel." [JN 12:13]

Although Holy Week is a week of ups and downs, we, who know how the story ends, can see in the Palms the celebration of not only the "king of Israel", but the King of Kings. Perhaps it is quite significant that we Catholics have the tradition of placing our Palms next to (or intertwined with) the Crucifix, for it is on the Cross that Jesus ascends His Throne, for it is there that "a great enemy of [the world] had been crushed." [cf. 1 MC 13:51]

As the Ashes help us to realize that that we are dependent on God for our lives, the Palms help us to realize that we are dependent on Jesus for our salvation...for Everlasting Life.

Palms and Palm Sunday can help us to understand that we must follow our King to the Heart of Lent, which leads to the Heart of Easter, as we will see in our next column.