

Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion

The suffering of Jesus comforts us when we suffer. It reassures us that he understands the physical and emotional pain we endure. It strengthens us when we fear future suffering because we know that he has already experienced what it will be like. The popular name for today is Palm Sunday, but its full title is Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion. It is a day when we remember suffering.

Saint Paul describes the suffering of Jesus in his Letter to the Philippians. The passage we hear as today's second reading has been part of Palm Sunday celebrations since the earliest Christian lectionaries. It has been proclaimed on this day every year for at least 1600 years. The first half speaks of the person and death of Jesus, and the second half speaks of his resurrection and exaltation. St. Paul says that Jesus was "in the form of God" but "he did not regard equality with God something to be grasped." Jesus could have avoided all suffering by grasping his divinity, but he did not. This is the only place in the writings of St. Paul that makes a point out of something Jesus did not do. He did not cling to his divinity. Instead, he became one of us.

Paul says that Jesus became human, and not just any kind of human, but a slave. He also suffered death, and not just any kind of death, but death on a cross. He did this because he loved us, and he knew that in his suffering, we could be saved.

The suffering of Jesus comforts us, but it also challenges us. In families I have seen one spouse suffer for the sake of another. I have seen both parents suffer for the sake of their children. In schools I have seen students suffer for one another. People do all of this out of love, and that is following the example of Jesus.

But sometimes we do not suffer so well. Sometimes we think suffering is beneath our dignity. We resent it. We make other people suffer with us. Parents fight. Children disobey. Classmates gossip. We do not suffer with love for others. We suffer with pride in ourselves.

We are all going to suffer whether we like it or not. But we will endure our suffering best if we do it out of love, even for the people who are hurting us. Jesus' suffering was beneath his dignity. But he let it go. He did not cling to his divinity. In spite of being God, he lowered himself out of love. That is the example he gives us. Think about the people who are causing your suffering. What do you feel toward them? If it is resentment, then you have not yet suffered like Christ. It's as if he says to us, "If you want to suffer like me, you will find joy only if you do it out of love."