

Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion – Cycle C
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – April 14, 2019
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Fifteen years ago, I went to see the movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, when it was first released. I went primarily because I knew people in the parish would ask me whether they should see it – and I wanted to be able to respond based upon my own judgment, not just on what I had read. I found the film to be brutally realistic in its violence – too realistic for many people. I advised parishioners to approach the film with caution. The violence, I'm afraid, is what most people remember from the film, but there were also so many powerful images that may have gone unnoticed – to Catholics, at least. They didn't go unnoticed to Protestants. I was in a Christian bookstore on the campus of Union University in Jackson, Tennessee, a few weeks after the film came out. Two Protestant ministers were also there and I couldn't help but overhear their conversation about the film. They were surprised that Mary figured so prominently in the movie – even though they reluctantly acknowledged that the Scriptures place Mary on the road to Calvary and at the foot of the cross. They were shocked that as Christ agonized on the cross, the film cut to an image of the Last Supper. It was uncomfortable for them that the sacrifice of Calvary would be so visibly associated with the un-bloody sacrifice of the Eucharistic table. And their eyes were opened when they saw Jesus carrying his cross. He looked out at the people surrounding him, jeering at him, spitting at him. In the film, Jesus saw those same people cheering him, waiving palm branches and shouting “Hosanna to the Son of David!” These Protestant ministers had never before seen the connection between the crowds in Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday and the crowds gathered on that first Good Friday – obviously, they had never celebrated Palm Sunday in a Catholic Church.

What today's liturgy does so well is demonstrate that the same people who praised Jesus one minute were those who turned on him the next. We listened once again to the story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem – we're invited to take blessed palm to remind us that we too are part of that crowd. But then, moments later, we heard the words, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” come from our own lips. Yes, we who welcomed Christ with joy are also the ones shouting for his execution. The dichotomy present in this liturgy is also the dichotomy of our lives – we try to be faithful, to keep the commandments, to be attentive to the Lord in prayer – but time and again we find ourselves in sin, turning our backs on what we believe and how we should live. Like it or not, we belong to both crowds. We'd love to think that we were Our Lady, and John and Mary Magdalene – that we were among those who stayed with Jesus to the end – among those who never

abandoned him. But, if we are honest with ourselves, then we can't say that. We know that, like Peter and most of the other disciples, we too have walked away from time to time. We know that, like the crowd in Jerusalem, we praised Jesus when it was popular and forgot him when it was not. We know, deep in our beings, that the passion Jesus endured was for you and me as much as it was for anyone else. We approach the holy ground of this Palm Sunday, of this holiest week of the year with reverence because we realize that we are not mere spectators. We are not just watching a movie – this is our life, our faith, our salvation. Christ came to suffer and die for my sins and yours. This week, may we have the hunger to place ourselves at the Last Supper and the courage to remain at the foot of the cross – only then can we be ready for the resurrection!