

Our historic liturgy has many rites, ceremonies, and symbols found within it. And while these aren't commanded in Scripture and therefore required for all Christians, they still serve as excellent teaching tools, helping point us to what Scripture does say. Sometimes the meaning is simpler, sometimes it's deeper. Sometimes it's more obvious; sometimes it takes some digging and thinking to understand.

The various changes to the processional crucifix for Palm Sunday are some that took me a fair bit of pondering to understand. Whitney and I were talking about it a few days ago, and I commented on how it seemed odd to, on the one hand, have it covered with a veil, hiding Christ, and then on the other hand have it ornamented with palm branches, decorating and drawing further attention to it. It seemed almost contradictory.

Yet Whitney gently reminded me that the veiling of the crucifix and the palm branches are traditions that go back a long ways, practiced for centuries and centuries by faithful Christians, and so there must be good meaning behind them, even I didn't see it right away. So as I working on this sermon, reading, thinking, praying, and reading again, by God's grace the light bulb finally came on.

The veiled, palm-decorated crucifix is actually a perfect illustration for what went on on Palm Sunday, something we can see and be reminded of the account in Scripture. The palms, and the veil, and the crucifix itself, all point to different parts of our Lord's gracious coming to save His people.

So first off, we have the palms. As the Bible tells us, the crowd that went out to meet Jesus cut branches from palm trees and waved them about. This was an act of praise and celebration. Think of it as the first century equivalent of waving flags and streamers during a parade or a rally.

This praise is not only seen in the waving of the palms but heard in the words which the crowd is crying out. "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!" In these words, we hear why they are praising God for the coming of Jesus. They're praising God because they perceive Jesus to be the Messiah, the one foretold by the Old Testament who will come and save His people. Hence their cries of Hosanna, which means "Save us!"

They herald Jesus as one coming in the name of the Lord – meaning that He is coming in the authority and the power of the Lord, Yahweh, the God of Israel. He is no earthly agent, but one sent by God Himself.

They also hail Jesus as the King of Israel. Here the crowd is looking back to David, the most faithful king that Israel ever had, who had been given a promise by God that one of his descendants would sit on his throne, and that throne and kingdom would last forever.

In all these words of praise and waving of palms, the crowds are correct. Jesus is the Messiah. He had come to save them. He is the fulfillment of the Old Testament. He does come in the name of Yahweh. He is the true King of Israel. And so it is good and right that the crowds praise Him, for He is most certainly worthy of their praises, their shouts, their waving palm branches.

We wave palm branches still today, because Jesus is just as worthy of praise now as He was then. We cry out Hosanna to Him, because Jesus is the one, the only one, who can save from sin and death.

He comes in the name, the power, the authority of the Lord, Yahweh, for He is Yahweh, then and now and forever. This is what St. Paul is praising when he writes to the Philippians in our Epistle reading, saying, “Therefore God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Every knee bows at the name of Jesus, because the name of Jesus is the name of God. Every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord, ‘Lord’ here not meaning ‘master’ but rather ‘the LORD,’ Yahweh.

Jesus is the true King of Israel, Israel being understood in its New Testament sense – not the biological descendants of Jacob, not a nation-state on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea, but all those who believe in the promise given to Abraham, the promise of the Messiah, who is Jesus. Because we share the faith of Abraham, and are children of Abraham by faith, Jesus is our King.

We praise Him in our words and our actions. We do this now, letting our lives be a sacrifice of praise to Him. And as the Bible tells us, we will do this into eternity. When you see the palm branches on the crucifix, or in your hand, remember the words of Revelation 7: “After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’”

The crowd praising Jesus with palm branches outside Jerusalem becomes a crowd here in our congregation, praising Jesus with palm branches, and eventually we will be part of the multitude in heaven that no one could number, praising Jesus with palm branches in our hands.

It’s an incredible thing to think about, something we wish we could see now. Yet we can’t. It’s hidden from us. That’s what we’re taught by the veil. A veil is a thin piece of cloth, through which you can see an outline or a shadow, but not the actual thing itself.

The veil reminds us that those present on the first Palm Sunday, and we ourselves, don’t fully see the truth, and we don’t see because of sin.

The crowd, enthusiastic as it was, didn’t grasp the truth of who Jesus truly was or what He had come to do. It is true, as we said earlier, that those things they were saying about Jesus were correct. And they were correct in praising Him. But as we’ll see from the crowd’s actions as that week goes on, they aren’t saying these things from a right understanding.

They are calling out for Jesus to save them, but not from sin and eternal death. No, they’re calling out for Jesus to save them from earthly troubles. They’ve seen the signs that Jesus has worked, most recently the raising of Lazarus from the dead, and they want those signs worked on them, too. It’s similar to when Jesus fed the five thousand. They want the miracles, but the teaching they don’t pay much attention too.

They want Jesus to be the King of Israel, not in a heavenly sense, but again as we saw with the miraculous feeding, they want Him to be an earthly king. They want Him to save them from the oppressive Romans and their tax collectors; to throw out the Gentiles and the Samaritans and make the land “pure” again.

They may use words from the Scriptures, but they are not thinking of the Messiah’s coming for the reasons that the Scriptures speak of. The truth is veiled by sin, sinful desires that are focused on the things of this life rather than the life to come.

Another group in the reading has the veil of sin obstructing their view as well. This would be the Pharisees. They have been in conflict with Jesus almost from the start, their students harassing Jesus’ cousin and forerunner, John the Baptist. Some of them, such as Nicodemus, have come to see the truth. Yet he and the others who believe are cowed by the vast majority of the group, whose resentment of Jesus has grown and grown.

Though Jesus has corrected the Pharisees in love, both love for the people they teach and love for the Pharisees themselves, they have not taken it well. They have gone from arguing with Jesus to saying He is in league with Beelzebub, prince of demons, to actively plotting to murder Him. When they see the events unfolding that Sunday in Jerusalem, they aren’t concerned with the prophetic words of Scripture – the Scripture they claim to teach. No, all they see is a threat to their power over the people. “So the Pharisees said to one another, ‘You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him.’” The sin of pride has veiled the truth from their eyes.

We too have the veil of sin over our eyes as well. Part of this veil is the sin that’s corrupted our nature, the sin of our flesh that just cannot stand in the presence of God. This is the sin that’s seen in the ancient Israelites, who are frightened by the glory of God reflecting off of Moses’ face, requiring him to wear a veil. This is the sin that causes the prophet Isaiah to think that, because he, a sinful man, has beheld the Lord God in a vision, that he will be utterly destroyed.

Our sinful flesh is what prevents us even now from being able to behold the full glory of God. This is why our Lord must humble Himself and veil His glory, for instance coming to us in bread and wine. It’s only when we are finally cleansed of sin completely that we may behold the full glory of Christ, as the saints in heaven now do.

In addition to this sinful nature, our eyes are also veiled by the sins we actively commit. For example, like the crowd, we often are tempted to want earthly glory as a result of following Jesus. We’d like it if being a Christian made our lives easier, more comfortable, happier. Or at the very least, it would be great to go back to the days when being a practicing Christian opened doors in society, rather than shut them.

Our sinful desires often veil the uncomfortable truths that God’s word tells us, such as that we will have tribulation in this world, that being a follower of Christ will put one at odds with the world, that faithfulness to Jesus must come before anything or anyone else, even those closest to us.

That seed of pride, openly blossomed in the Pharisees, lurks in our hearts as well, tempting us to think we know a better way than that of Christ. The veil over our hearts would have us stay in the glory of Palm Sunday and never walk with our Lord to the cross of Good Friday.

Yet under the veil remains the crucifix. That reminds us that, even though the veil of sin hides the truth, Christ still comes to save us. When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, He knew that the people didn't grasp the truth of what was happening. He knew that sin had veiled their hearts and minds. He knew their praises came from a mix of true thankfulness and sinful desire. He knew all that, and He came anyway.

In fact, it was precisely to deal with that sin and its effects that He came from heaven in the first place. His earthly path to the cross didn't start on Palm Sunday, but more than thirty years before, when He was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary. And His coming was foretold clear back by God Himself in the Garden, when He promised that He would come to deliver people from death and restore them to Himself. The Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem was just one notable event on that millennia-long journey.

The crucifix reminds us that Jesus came to Jerusalem to be crucified. He came to be that suffering servant foretold by Isaiah, the one who would bear our griefs and carry our sorrows and by His stripes heal us. He came to be the sacrifice, the sin offering, to bring about the new covenant, the covenant of grace. There on the cross, Jesus would show the love of God at its greatest, for as Jesus said, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

And Jesus would not lay down His life just for His friends. He would even lay it down for His enemies, that they might become His friends. He would cry out, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," speaking of those who sent Him to be crucified, and those who were nailing Him to the cross, and even us, whose sins put Him there.

We have a crucifix to remind us that Christ died for us as well. Even when sin clouds our minds and veils our eyes, Christ still has offered Himself for us. He came for us, not because we deserve it or have earned it, but because He loves us and desires to give us new and eternal life. He came to crush the sinful pride in our hearts, and He did this by humbling Himself and becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

When Satan attacks us with doubt and despair, we can look to the cross and remember that wonderful truth, that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, willingly gave up His life for us, and nothing can change that fact. This reality also makes the cross is the center of the Church's proclamation, for in it we can share with whomever we meet that the Lord of all has died for them, that they might live forever with Him in paradise. Jesus rode into Jerusalem and went to Calvary for all people.

And so in the crucifix, veiled with a cloth and decorated with palm branches, we have the truth of Palm Sunday. We praise Jesus, the King of Israel who comes in the name of the Lord to save us, for even though our sin causes His glory to be veiled from us, His love, shown in Him hanging on the cross, is always there for us.

In the name of Jesus, the King of Israel, amen.