

# CHRIST ENTERS JERUSALEM: JOY AND GRIEF

**Palm Sunday**  
**March 19, 1978**

*Isaiah 50:4-7*

*Philippians 2:6-11*

*Matthew 26:14-27, 66*

Centuries ago Jerusalem was a sign for all people in the world. The Church today takes on that sign. As Jerusalem was filled with hope on that first Palm Sunday, so now today, every city, every nation and every people incarnates Jesus' hope in their own national reality and in the reality of their own personal lives. This is what we mean when we refer to the liturgical meaning of these celebrations. The liturgy is not simply a remembering of some past event --- here we are not remembering what Jesus did twenty centuries ago. The liturgy is all about presence and present realities. The reality is that today, March 19<sup>th</sup>, 1978, in the midst of the palms of the Cathedral of San Salvador, Jesus is entering here, entering the reality of El Salvador. Wherever people are celebrating Palm Sunday, there is Christ, like twenty centuries ago in Jerusalem, entering the reality of the liturgy of our Church (and I know that because of this radio broadcast people are celebrating with us in many towns and villages).

Therefore my sisters and brothers, I invite you at the beginning of this Holy Week to live these days not by remembering past events but to live this time in light of the hope and anguish and plans and failures of today's world and of our nation. In this way Jesus will shelter us in the same way that he sheltered Jerusalem and the whole world that awaited his salvation.

As we live this day, we call to mind two dimensions of this ceremony. The first part triumphal: Jesus enters Jerusalem and people go out to receive him with song and joy. But as Jesus enters Jerusalem, the mood becomes more somber and now everything revolves around his passion. So too as we entered the Cathedral, the mood became more somber. We have just listened to the reading of Jesus' passion according to Saint Matthew --- a reading that was proclaimed by the three seminarians in a very dramatic way.

My brothers and sisters, in light of this celebration and in order to live these mysteries most fully, I want to ask you three questions that ought to be in the forefront of every Christian's mind during this Holy Week of 1978: (1) What did Jesus find when he entered Jerusalem and what does Jesus find as he enters here? (2) Who is this person who enters Jerusalem, this person who will take up the cross, this person who will die in such horrible ignominy? (3) As a result of our faith in this Jesus who continues to redeem our nation and all the world, what commitment is expected of us, the People of God?

## What did Jesus find when he entered Jerusalem and what does Jesus find as he enters here?

The first question: what did Jesus find in Jerusalem? Clearly he found a good people. Children, young people and a multitude of pilgrims came out to greet him. We have just enacted this scene here. You are that good people, a simple people, a people filled with hope and a people who embrace Jesus --- you are the remnant of Jerusalem. The promises made to Abraham, Moses and David filled this group of people who went out to receive Jesus. All the promises of the Old Testament came to the surface on this Palm Sunday. The people, who had been promised a Redeemer, believed that the Redeemer had arrived and they went out to greet him. This was a moment of great faith as the people embraced Jesus. I see in you, the beloved people who are participating in this ceremony and gathered around the altars of all our churches throughout our country. I see you as the people who wait for Jesus and then go out to receive him with joy and simplicity. God cannot be deceived.

But unfortunately Christ finds in this joyful people the reality of sin. He comes to take away the sins of the world. He comes to confront the powers of hell. He will feel in his flesh the lashes of the evil of sin, but these same lashes enable him to become the Redeemer. He finds a Temple that has become a marketplace: *My house shall be a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of thieves* (a). Jesus finds people in authority who have distorted his message. He finds leaders who have distorted the destiny of the people. These leaders manipulated the people in such a way that the Hosannas of Sunday became a petition for condemnation on Friday. (b)

Woe to the leaders of people! If they are good and competent, then they will guide the people to encounter Jesus, the Redeemer of people. But if they are inept and sinful and ambitious and selfish, they will seduce the people to perdition. Thus it happened that Jesus found hypocritical manipulation and jealousy. He was asked: *Do you hear what they are saying? Tell them to be quiet* (c). Jesus told them: *I tell you, if they keep silent, the stones will cry out! You are jealous, so if you and other people do not want to recognize me, the very stones will cry out. I am God and I come to redeem the world. I have no other option.* Jesus found great social injustice and a people that he referred to in the following way: *My heart is moved with pity for them, for they are like sheep without a shepherd* (d). This is what Jesus found in Jerusalem.

Since the liturgy is not an act of remembering but a living, present reality, we change the scenery and ask: what does Jesus find here in El Salvador on this Palm Sunday of 1978? My sisters and brothers, he also finds here a good people. I am happy that this people have gone out to greet the Lord with palms and joy and the songs of Hosanna. I experience the innocence of the children and of so many young men and women, of so many people consecrated to the Lord, people with a simple piety, people praying and asking for mercy. I feel the presence of a true remnant of faith and hope. May this people that goes out to meet the Lord today in number.

But unfortunately, like Jerusalem, behind the multitude that filled Jesus' heart with joy, I find another people in sin --- sin in horrifying forms that will also kill Jesus during this Holy Week. Sin that is killing Jesus today. Holy Week in El Salvador is a time of shame. I not know how many things can be brought out of the caves and the darkness and presented to Christ, open to his reprimands and call to conversion. But as I usually do on Sunday<sup>1</sup>, I find it important to point out the following realities.

A week of post-electoral frustration.<sup>2</sup> We see a people that have no hope of a democratic openness that will allow them to express their political desires. I have received testimony from one polling place that told me that only 46% of those who were registered, voted. Counting the votes of this 46%, 52% of the votes were null, that is, 52% of the people rather than express their will expressed their frustration and said they were insulted and offended and felt repressed. Others simply abstained. On this Palm Sunday Jesus finds himself in the midst of the sin of abstention. So many values could have been taken advantage of in order to establish the common good, but this did not happen. The right to participate in the construction of the common good is one of the signs of the times, but this right was frustrated and once again trampled upon. It is here that the Lord finds sin --- the sin of democracy that has broken down and been repressed as is evident in the fact that people who wanted to work for this common good were unable to express their desire.

What else does Jesus find here during this Holy Week? A week of bloodshed. Two reservists killed two citizens. In Planes de Renderos the authorities have refused to hand over the body of José Estanislao Recinos to his wife. A woman was killed near the Apollo movie house. In the Department of Chalatenango, the steward of the Conacaste hermitage, Otmaro Guardado, after having been captured, was found dead --- he was a good man. Just three days ago, here in the capital, the armed forces descended on a demonstration of *campesinos* who had come together because they were promised a dialogue with the Banco de Fomento Agropecuario. They wanted to discuss lowering the prices for leasing land and buying insecticides and fertilizer.<sup>3</sup> The people are hungry and need land to plant. They need someone who will enter into dialogue with them in order to resolve their problems. What do they find: dead and wounded *campesinos*. Among those who died was a child from La Escuela Rodezno and a police official. Among the wounded were many people who were simply innocent by-standers. This, my sisters and brothers, is what Jesus finds here during this Holy Week.

Finally, Jesus finds a third reality: arbitrariness and injustice. The *campesino* Leonardo Muñoz Pacheco has been accused of setting fire to the mayor's office in El Paisnal,<sup>4</sup> yet the day before the fire he had been taken prisoner. How could he set the fire if he was in jail? Other *campesinos* have been accused of complicity in this same crime and their confessions (surely obtained by torture) have been published in the newspapers. Later, when they appeared in court,<sup>5</sup> where they were able to speak freely, they denied their complicity, yet these statements were never published and the good reputation of these individuals has been tarnished. No importance is given to these injustices that ruin the prestige and the honor of innocent people. O Jesus this is what you find here during this Holy Week!

Funebunda Peña Bonilla, a mother of four children, and the workers Jesús Estrada Díaz and Fermín Domínguez, in extrajudicial statements stand accused as the manufacturers of explosives.<sup>6</sup> The fact that they deny these charges in court is never published. *Campesinos* from San Vicente have remained in prison for three months despite the fact that 6,000,000 *colones* have been deposited in the Banco de Fomento Agropecuario on their behalf and despite other documents in the Ministry of Agriculture. The lot of the poor is given no importance while other interests are seen as more worthy of attention and respectable!

My sisters and brothers, in light of these events of Holy Week the voice of God, the voice of Jesus, comes to redeem us and tells us that we must continue to raise our voices on behalf of these just demands. I become afraid, my sisters and brothers, when repressive laws and

violent attitudes remove legitimate escapes for people who need to demonstrate. If these escape valves are taken away what will happen when the pot reaches its boiling point and there is no escape valve? It will explode. But now there is still time! There is still time to listen to the voice of the people. There is still time to allow the people to make their desires known. There is still time to establish justice. Naturally, my sisters and brothers, when we defend these just aspirations of people, we want to make it clear that we do not support the demands of terrorists. The Church does not support any form of violence --- neither the violence that springs up as a result of repression nor the repressive violence in its many barbaric forms. We call people to come to a mutual understanding, to dialogue and to live together with justice and love. These are the powers of the Church. It is from this perspective of love and justice that we ask you, my sisters and brothers, to pray for those who have died in these situations and to pray for those who have been wounded and captured. Bring them to the courts and apply justice. Do not abuse them. Create an environment where the just will of the people can be expressed.

I have just been in Costa Rica. They have also just had elections there. Different coloured banners are still flying on the roofs and I heard the joy of a people able to discuss their candidates and parties; who have cast their vote in complete freedom and are happy with the majority opinion, and who are all ready to work for the common good. How beautiful is an authentic democracy, a sense of justice, respect for the opinion of the people!

This is what Christ finds, brothers and sisters; because Palm Sunday, the reading of the Passion, our Holy Week processions are not meant to be alienation or opium; they are meant to be the ferment of the Gospel, the presence of a Christ lashing sin though in a few days it will cost him his death on a cross. Death to become the redeemer, death for justice, death in love, and in him we find the hope of our peoples.

### **Who enters Jerusalem, is going to carry a cross and die amid such terrible shame ?**

This is my second thought. Who is one who enters Jerusalem today? He is described in today's readings. The first reading from the prophet Isaiah presents us with a people that had lost almost all hope, a people disheartened. God raises up a mysterious servant and tells him: *Listen to my words, you are going to take on all these crimes and my divine justice will rest upon you. Through suffering you will learn how to console others and give them liberation. You will guide the people* (e). This Servant of Yahweh (biblical commentators are uncertain about his identity) could refer to the people or to Jesus. But it does not refer to Jesus alone because Jesus is always in a relationship with his people. In the bible this mystery is referred to as a communitarian personality. In other words, a man becomes incarnated in a personality and this personality is extended to the community. This Jesus enters into solidarity with all of us and we feel that Jesus' destiny is also our destiny. As Jesus carried his cross, we experience that we, as a people, are also bearing our cross. As Jesus extended his arms and was crucified, the people feel that they are also crucified. But this humbled and crucified people find hope in Jesus: *I have taught you words of comfort and through suffering you have learned how to console others.*

My beloved sisters and brothers, the call of this Holy Week, this Palm Sunday, is not a call to conformity. It is a call that invites us: give a meaning of divine poverty to your trials; give a meaning of redemption to your suffering; accept the cross; embrace the cross as Jesus did; do not be passive but with love build a civilization of freedom and love. Though we do not see the Servant of Yahweh here, like Jesus, we will encounter this Servant at the time of

our death. Death is not important when after death there is an atmosphere of freedom, love, equality and happiness. Let us walk toward that climate that the Redeemer offers us.

The second reading from Saint Paul is most eloquent. It is a hymn in honor of the Incarnation. It is a hymn about a God who renounces his position as God, who sets aside the happiness of heaven and becomes man --- a man who does not talk about his prerogatives as God, but becomes a man like every other man. Yes, Scripture tells us today that God became a man like every other man (f) and this man was bound by the authorities of his time, brought before the tribunals, and judged. When I hear Saint Paul speak about Jesus as being a man like any other man, I think of those persons that we so frequently read about in our newspapers, the handcuffed *campesinos*, the tortured *campesinos*, the workers who are denied their rights. A man like every other man, this is what Jesus wanted to be.

But even more, Jesus was humiliated by experiencing a death that was forbidden to be inflicted on Romans because they were free. This form of death, however, could be imposed on those people who were enslaved. Rome crucified people but not people who were Roman citizens. Rome crucified those who were dependent on the Empire. Since Palestine depended on Rome --- Pilate was the Roman representative to those oppressed people --- Jesus had to be humiliated as a person who was not worthy of citizenship. He had to die. He had to be humiliated. The Incarnation led him to this extreme. But in death he is exalted. In today's reading we heard the words: *Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord* (g). This is the glory that was given to our Redeemer. During these days of Holy Week, as we look upon Jesus humiliated beneath the weight of the cross, let us not forget another reality and therefore, with deep faith, let us say: *Even though it seems that the Lord is suffering, even though it seems that the Lord is carrying his cross, yet I will participate in his glory*. Jesus did not travel the painful road of torture and death alone. He traveled that road with all people and therefore we will also rise with him. We have read the passion, the greatest story about a man's suffering. There is no other story like this.

**As a result of our faith in this Jesus who continues to redeem our nation and all the world, what commitment is expected of us, the People of God?**

Finally, me dear sisters and brothers, we, as the people of El Salvador, respond to this Jesus as a people filled with hope. What a beautiful scene! Look at these palms! Palm is a sign of victory and a sign of martyrdom --- for after the pain and torture there is glory. For this reason Palm Sunday is a beautiful sign for all people. With their palms, their branches and their flowers, the people are saying that they are willing to walk with Jesus to martyrdom. They are saying that the victory of faith will conquer death. This victory, the victory of faith and hope, is the victory that conquers the world. Hatred, terror, arms, repression, and violence --- these realities will solve nothing. Your faith, however, the faith that is demonstrated in the procession of Palm Sunday, this peaceful march with palms in hand, with hearts filled with hope, with souls filled with love --- these realities will change the world and this is the road that the People of God must travel.

Holy Week is a call to follow Christ's example of austerity, the only legitimate violence, the only violence that Jesus accepted. He invites us to do violence to ourselves: *Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me* (h). We must do violence to ourselves, repress pride and destroy the seeds of avarice, greed and haughtiness.

We must destroy these roots in our heart. This is what must be destroyed and this is the violence we must undertake so that the new person might come to life --- for the new person is the only one who can build a new civilization, a civilization of love.

Therefore my sisters and brothers, I want to invite you to participate fully in the services of Holy Week that will be celebrated in your towns and villages. I am happy that we are going to celebrate Holy Week services not only in those places where there are resident priests but also in those communities where religious women, catechists and lay people will lead the community in prayer. These leaders of the community have prepared appropriate readings and have organized Holy Week celebrations in their respective town and villages. If this voice is reaching those town and villages, I invite all of you to participate in these services.

How many new people will arise during this Holy Week! Do not be content with participating in the various processions. I know that for many people the celebration of Holy Week is focused on the Procession of Silence or the Sacred Burial Procession. But when I am told that drunk people and others who abuse these holy days and cause sin and disorder, when I hear that these people participate in the Sacred Burial Procession and then return to their parties and orgies --- this saddens me. This kind of attitude is like that of the Jews who profaned and spat on Jesus. The kind of Holy Week that I desire, my sisters and brothers, is the one that I have just described ---a time when we do violence to ourselves and root out all vice and disorder. This will allow us to rise with Jesus with joy on Holy Saturday evening.

I want to highlight two principal celebrations: first, on Holy Thursday at 9:00am we will celebrate the only Mass. On Holy Thursday morning, Mass is not celebrated in any other church. In the evening these churches will celebrate the institution of the Eucharist. But Thursday morning Mass is celebrated in the Cathedral where the bishop and all the priests bless the holy oils that will be used in the administration of the sacraments. At this celebration, the priests will renew their commitment to serve the People of God. We hope that representatives from all the parishes are present at this celebration. If the pastor is unable to come, send some representatives from the parish so that they can bring back to the parish the holy oils that will be used during the administration of baptism, confirmation, etc. The presence of these oils in the local parish is a sign of unity between the local church and the cathedral. I ask you to give priority to this celebration that will take place here in the cathedral at 9:00am Thursday morning. The other important celebration will take place here in the cathedral at 7:30pm Saturday. I again extend a special invitation to all the young women and men to participate in this celebration of the Lord's resurrection. I see these two celebrations as the highlights of the beauty and depth of the spirituality of Holy Week. These celebrations allow me celebrate the unity of our Church together with all the priests and to celebrate the resurrection of the Lord as a hymn of victory and hope in the Lord.

My dear sisters and brothers, even though we seem to be living on a dead end street, let us not lose hope. In the book of Isaiah, just before today's reading, God spoke to the People: *Why are you mistrustful? Has someone cut off the hand that blesses you? Do you think I have no energy to save you?* (i) My sisters and brothers, let us respond to these questions with an act of faith: *Yes Lord, we believe that you are the Redeemer! For this reason we have praised you today with the same acclamations of joy that the people sang when they went out to meet you on that first Palm Sunday, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, hosanna in the highest!"*(j)

We are going to continue our Eucharist and we will place on the altar of Christ all our hopes and all our good intentions to celebrate a Holy Week that is worthy of our faith.

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<sup>1</sup> On this occasion Mons. Romero includes the “events of the week” in the first reflection of his homily.

<sup>2</sup> In the legislative and municipal elections of March 12 1978, in which only the Party of National Conciliation (PCN) and the Popular Salvadoran Party (PPS) took part, there was a high rate of abstention. The Christian Democratic Party (PDC), the National Revolutionary Movement (MNR), and the National Democratic Union (UDN), which in the past formed the National Opposition Union (UNO), after the fraud in the presidential elections of February 2 1977, decided not to take part. See *Prensa Gráfica* 13 March 1978 and Hector Dada Hirezi, “Las elecciones de marzo en El Salvador”, ECA 354 (1978) pp. 248-249.

<sup>3</sup> A week later the Archbishop published a report of these serious acts. See “Solidaridad”, *Orientación*, 2 April 1978.

<sup>4</sup> See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 15 March 1978.

<sup>5</sup> The Cámara Primera de lo Penal.

<sup>6</sup> See *La Prensa Gráfica*, 13 March 1978.

*Margin References* (a) Mt 21,13: (b) Mt 27,20: (c) Lk 19,34-40: (d) Mt 9,36: (e) Is 50,5-7: (f) Ph 2,7: (g) Ph 2,9-11: (h) Mt 16,24: (i) Is 50,2: (j) Mt 21,9.