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CHRIST ENTERS JERUSALEM: JOY AND PASSION

**Palm Sunday
19 March 1978**

Isaiah 50:4-7
Philippians 2:6-11
Matthew 26:14-27, 66

Twenty centuries ago Jerusalem was a sign for all the peoples of the world. The church today takes on that sign. Just as Jerusalem was filled with hope on that Palm Sunday, so this Sunday every city, every nation, and every people incarnate the hope that Christ brings for their own national reality and for the reality of our own lives. This is what is called the liturgical meaning of these celebrations. The liturgy is not simply remembering. Here we are not simply remembering that twenty centuries ago Christ entered Jerusalem. The liturgy is all about presence and present-day realities. The reality is that today, March 19, 1978, among all the palms in this Cathedral of San Salvador, Christ is entering into our Salvadoran realities. Wherever people are celebrating Palm Sunday—and I know that through the radio we are celebrating it in many towns and villages—there Christ is entering Jerusalem as he did twenty centuries ago, in the reality of our church's liturgy.

Therefore I invite you, sisters and brothers, at this solemn entrance into Holy Week, not to live these days as remembrance of the past, but to experience them with the hope, with the anguish, with the projects, and with the failures of our world and our nation as they are today. In this way may Christ shelter us just as twenty centuries ago he sheltered Jerusalem and the whole world that was to live by his redemption.

To understand this day, let us recall two aspects of this ceremony. The first part is triumphal: Christ enters Jerusalem, and people go out to receive him with joyful hosannas. But as Christ enters Jerusalem, the mood becomes more somber, and now everything revolves around his passion. So also here in the cathedral. You just heard three seminarians read dramatically the passion of Christ according to Saint Matthew.

In light of this celebration, brothers and sisters, and in order to live these mysteries more fully, I want to pose three questions that ought to be in the minds of all Christians during this Holy Week of 1978. First, what did Christ find when he entered Jerusalem, and what does Christ find here today? Second, who is this person who enters Jerusalem, this man who will take up the cross and die in such horrible ignominy? And third, what commitment is expected of us, his people, as a result of our faith in this Christ who continues to redeem our nation and all the world?

What did Christ find when he entered Jerusalem, and what does Christ find here today?

The first question: what did Christ find in Jerusalem? Clearly he found some good people: children, young people, and a multitude of pilgrims came out to greet him. We have just reenacted this scene here. You are that good multitude, those simple people, those souls who welcome Christ with hope—you are the remnant of Israel. The promises made to Abraham, Moses, and David devolved on this small group of people who went out to receive Jesus. All the legacy of the Old Testament came to fruition on this Palm Sunday. The people who had been promised a redeemer felt that the redeemer had arrived, and they went out to greet him. This was a bright moment of faith as the people embraced Jesus. I see the same in you, beloved faithful, as you participate in this ceremony and gather around the altars of all our churches throughout our country. You are the people who wait for Jesus and then go out with joy and simplicity to receive him. God cannot disappoint you.

But unfortunately Christ finds behind this joyful people the reality of sin. He comes in order to take away the sin of the world. He comes to confront those powers of hell. He will feel in his own flesh the lashes of the devil and of sin for taking on the role of Redeemer. He finds a temple that has become a marketplace: «Get that out of here!» says Christ. «My house shall be a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of thieves» (Matt 21:13). Christ finds authorities who distort his message; he finds a ruling class that has so twisted the destiny of this people that their hosannas of Palm Sunday can by Good Friday become a petition for execution (Matt 27:20).

Oh, what it means to be the people's leaders! If they are good and competent, then they guide the people to encounter Christ, the Redeemer of all. But if they are inept and sinful, given to ambition and greed, then they will seduce the people into perdition. Thus it happens that Christ meets up with hypocritical manipulation aimed at destroying him. Envious leaders tell him, «Don't you hear what those people are saying? Tell them to shut up and keep order» (Luke 19:39-40). And Christ responds, «If they keep silent, the stones will cry out! The problem is that you are jealous, but if you and other people do not want to recognize me, then the very stones will cry out. I am God, and I come to redeem the world. I should find no opposition». What does Christ find? Tremendous social injustice and people of whom he said, «My heart is moved with pity for them, for they are like sheep without a shepherd» (Matt 9:36). This is what Jesus finds in Jerusalem.

But let us change this scenery because the liturgy is not just remembering; it is present reality. What does Christ find here among us on this Palm Sunday of 1978? He also finds here many good people. I am happy with these people who have come out today to greet the Redeemer with palms and joyful hosannas. I experience the goodness of so many children, so many young people, so many people consecrated to the Lord with simple piety, praying and asking for mercy. I feel the presence of people who are truly a remnant of faith and hope. May these people who go out to meet the Lord ever increase in number.

But unfortunately, as in Jerusalem, behind this multitude who fills Christ's heart with joy, we find sin in all the horrifying forms that will kill Christ during this Holy Week and that are already killing him. This Holy Week is a time of shame in El Salvador. I don't know how many things can be brought out of the dark caves and hideouts to be presented to Christ, for

him to reprimand and call to conversion. But, as I usually do on Sundays¹, I find these three things to consider in the coming days.

This has been a week of post-electoral frustration². The people no longer have hope of a democratic openness that will allow them to express their political desires. I received testimony from one polling place that told me that only 46 percent of those registered actually voted. Counting the votes of that 46 percent, some 52 percent of the votes were null. Rather than express their will, the people expressed their frustration and said they were insulted and offended and felt repressed. Others simply abstained. The sin of abstaining is what Christ finds on this Palm Sunday. There are so many values that could be taken advantage of for the sake of the common good, but this does not happen. People feel frustrated when they try to participate in the construction of their own country, which is one of the signs of the times; this right has once again been trampled upon. This is where the Lord finds sin, the sin of democracy that has been mangled and repressed because people who want to work for the common good are unable to express their desires.

What else do we find during this Holy Week? A week of bloodshed. Two citizens killed at two roadblocks. In Planes the body of José Estanislao Recinos has been denied to his wife. A young woman was killed near the Apollo movie theater. In the department of Chalatenango the caretaker of the chapel in El Conacaste, Otmaro Guardado, was captured and then found dead; he was a good man. Just three days ago here in the capital force was used to disband a demonstration of *campesinos* who had been promised a chance to dialogue with the Agricultural Development Bank. They wanted to discuss lowering the prices for leasing land and buying insecticides and fertilizer³. Our people are hungry, and they need land to plant. They need someone to dialogue with in order to resolve their problems. Their desire to talk leaves them dead and wounded. Among those killed was a child from the Rodezno school and a police official. Among the wounded were many people who were simply passing by. This, my sisters and brothers, is what Christ finds here during this Holy Week.

Finally, Christ finds a third reality: arbitrariness and injustices. The *campesino* Leonardo Muñoz Pacheco was accused of setting fire to the mayor's office in El Paisnal⁴, but the day before the fire he had been taken prisoner. How could he have set the fire? Other *campesinos* were accused along with him, and their confessions (surely obtained by torture) have been published in the newspapers. Later, when they appeared in court⁵, where they were able to speak freely, they denied their involvement, but those statements were never published so that their good reputation has been tarnished. No importance is given to committing injustices or destroying people's reputation and honor. O Jesus, this is what you find here during Holy Week!

¹ On this occasion Archbishop Romero includes the «Events of the week» as the first reflection of his homily.

² In the legislative and municipal elections of 12 March 1978, in which only the National Conciliation Party (PCN) and the Salvadoran Popular Party (PPS) took part, there was a high rate of abstention. The Christian Democratic Party (PDC), the National Revolutionary Movement (MNR), and the Nationalist Democratic Union (UDN), which in earlier elections had formed the National Opposition Union (UNO), decided not to take part after the fraudulent presidential elections of 2 February 1977. See *La Prensa Gráfica* (13 March 1978 and DADA HIREZI H., «The March Elections in El Salvador», *ECA* 354 (1978) 248-249.

³ A week later the Archbishop published a report on these serious offenses. See «Solidarity» in *Orientación* (2 April 1978).

⁴ *La Prensa Gráfica* (15 March 1978).

⁵ The First Criminal Court.

Funebunda Peña Bonilla, mother of four children, and the workers Jesús Estrada Díaz and Fermín Domínguez stand accused in extrajudicial statements of being the manufacturers of explosives⁶. The fact that they deny these charges in court is never published. *Campesinos* from San Vicente have remained in prison for three months despite documents of the Ministry of Agriculture and a deposit of 6,000 *colones* in the Agricultural Development Bank on their behalf. What little importance is given to the lot of poor *campesinos* when other more valuable and respectable interests are at stake!

Considering these events of Holy Week, sisters and brothers, the voice of God, the voice of Christ who comes to redeem, tells us that we must not keep quiet our call for justice. I become afraid, 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 boiler reaches its limit and there is no escape valve, what will happen? It can explode. But there is still time! There is still time to allow the voice of the people to make plain what they desire as long as justice prevails at the same time. Naturally, sisters and brothers, when we defend these just aspirations, we are not supporting the demands of terrorists. The church does not agree with any form of violence, neither the violence that springs up as a result of repression nor the repressive violence in its many barbaric forms. The church calls people to come to mutual understanding, to dialogue, to justice, to love. These are the powers of the church. It is from this perspective of love and justice that we ask you, sisters and brothers, to pray for those who have died in these situations, for the wounded, for the beaten, for so many victims of violence. We ask that the lives of the wounded and the prisoners be respected. Let them be brought to the courts to apply justice under just laws, but do not maltreat and assault them. Create an environment where the just will of the people can be expressed.

I have just been in Costa Rica, where they also recently had elections. Different colored banners are still flying on the roofs, and I felt the people's joy because they were able to debate about their candidates and parties. They cast their votes in complete freedom and are happy with the will of the majority, and now all of them are ready to work for the common good. How beautiful is an authentic democracy, where there is a sense of justice and respect for the opinion of the people!

This is the situation Christ finds in our country, brothers and sisters. Palm Sunday, the reading of the Passion, and our Holy Week processions are not trying to remove us from our reality; they are not opium. Rather, they are meant to be the ferment of the Gospel, the presence of Christ who lashes out against sin even though in a few days it will cost him death on a cross. He dies for becoming Redeemer; he dies for justice; he dies loving, but in him we find the hope of our peoples.

Who is this man who enters Jerusalem, knowing that he will die in ignominy on a cross?

This is my second thought: who is this man who enters Jerusalem today? He is described in today's readings. The first reading from the prophet Isaiah presents us with a people who have 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. Upon you my divine justice will be discharged. But in your suffering you will learn to console others and give them liberation.

⁶ *La Prensa Gráfica* (13 March 1978).

You will guide the people» (Isa 50:5-7). This Servant of Yahweh—biblical commentators are uncertain about his identity—could certainly represent the people of Israel, or he could also be Christ, but never Christ alone without his people. In the Bible this mystery is referred to as a collective personality. That is, an individual displays a character or personality that is extended to the whole community. Christ enters into solidarity with all of us, and we feel that Christ's destiny is our destiny. As Christ carries his cross in Holy Week, we feel that it is the people carrying their cross. We experience the crucified people in the open, crucified arms of Christ, and this humbled, crucified people find hope in him: «I have taught you words of comfort, and through suffering you have learned how to console others».

Dear sisters and brothers, this call of Holy Week and Palm Sunday is not a call to conformity. Rather, it invites you to take your feeling of tribulation and give it a sense of divine poverty; give your suffering a sense of redemption; accept the cross; embrace it as Christ did; do not be passive, but with love build a civilization of freedom and love. Even if, like the Servant of Yahweh, we don't see fruits of our labor, we will find them at the time of death as Christ did. Death does not matter when behind death there is a realm of freedom, love, equality, and happiness. Let us walk, then, toward that bright realm the Redeemer offers us.

The second reading, the one 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 like any other man (Phil 2.7). Yes, just an ordinary man, the Bible tells us today, one who was arrested by the authorities of his time, brought before the tribunals, and executed. When I hear Isaiah or Saint Paul speak about «an ordinary man», I think of those persons we are used to seeing in our newspapers: the handcuffed *campesinos*, the tortured protesters, the workers denied their rights. A man like any other—that is what Jesus wanted to be.

But even more, Jesus was humiliated by undergoing a death that could not be inflicted on Romans because they were free, but it was imposed on people enslaved. Rome crucified people but not those who were Roman citizens. Romans crucified those who were subject to their empire. Since Palestine was subject to Rome—Pilate was the Roman governor over that oppressed people—Christ had to be debased as a person unworthy of citizenship. He had to die humiliated. The incarnation led him to this extreme, but from that humiliation he began to be 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» (Phil 2:9-11). This is the glory of our Redeemer. Let us not forget this as we look upon Jesus humiliated beneath the weight of the cross in these days of Holy Week. Let us say from the depth of our faith, «Though he seems to be like me in my suffering, he is the Lord, and though I seem to be like him in carrying the cross, I will share in his glory». Jesus does not pass through the painful tunnel of torture and death all alone. Traveling with him is a whole people, and we will also rise with him. We have read the passion, the greatest story about a man who has suffered. There is no one like Christ.

What commitment is expected of us, his people, as a result of our faith in this Christ who continues to redeem our nation and all the world?

Finally, dear sisters and brothers, we for our part respond to this Christ as a people filled with hope. What a beautiful scene here! Look at these palms! The palm is a sign of victory. The palm is a sign of martyrdom, but of a martyrdom that brings glory after the torment. That is why Palm Sunday is a magnificent sign for all people. With their palms, with their branches, with their flowers, the people are telling Christ that they are willing to go with him to martyrdom and that with his help faith will conquer all. This is the victory that overcomes the world: your faith and your hope. Not hatred, not terror, not arms, not repression, not violence—these will solve nothing. What will bring solutions is your faith, sisters and brothers, the faith of your Palm Sunday procession, this peaceful march with palms in hand, with hearts filled with hope, with souls filled with love. This is the march of God's people.

Holy Week is a call to follow Christ's example of austerity. The only legitimate violence is the violence that Christ did to himself, and he invites us to do violence to ourselves: «Those who wish to come after me must deny themselves and take up their cross» (Matt 16:24). They must do violence to themselves and repress their outbreaks of pride; they must kill the outbursts of avarice, jealousy, and arrogance in their soul and their heart. That is what must be killed; that is the violence that must be done to bring forth the new person, for only new women and men can build a new civilization, a civilization of love.

Therefore, 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 this Holy Week there will be celebrations not only where there are priests, but also where there are religious communities; many of the communities of San Salvador have gone out to the rural areas. There will also be celebrations in all the towns and villages where lay catechists have prepared appropriate readings and have organized Holy Week services. If this voice of mine is reaching those towns and villages, I urge you all to participate because Holy Week is like a baptism of the people, a baptism in which Christ invites us to become part of his passion and his resurrection.

So many new women and men will come forth from this Holy Week! Don't be content just with walking in the processions. I know that for many people Holy Week consists only in the procession of silence or the procession of Holy Burial. But I am sad when I hear that the processions are attended by inebriated people and others who abuse these sacred occasions by committing sin and creating disorder. They take part in the procession of Holy Burial and then afterward return to wild parties. That kind of Holy Week saddens me. Such people seem to be like the Jews who swore at the Lord and spat on him. The Holy Week I desire, sisters and brothers, is the one that I have just described, the one in which we do violence to our own lives, our vices and disorders. In this way we will rise joyfully with Christ on Holy Saturday evening.

I want to highlight two principal celebrations: first, on Holy Thursday at 9:00 o'clock in the morning we will celebrate here in the cathedral the single Mass allowed. On Holy Thursday morning there is no Mass anywhere else. On Thursday evening in all the churches there will be celebration of the institution of the Eucharist. But on Holy Thursday morning Mass is celebrated only in cathedrals, where the bishop and all the priests bless the holy oils that will be used for the sacraments. At this time the priests renew their commitment to serve the people of God. We hope to have representatives from all the parishes. If the pastors cannot come, please send a small representation from your parishes so that after Mass they can get the containers of holy oils. These oils will be used in the parishes as signs of unity with the cathedral whenever baptism, confirmation, anointing of the sick, etc., are celebrated. I ask you

earnestly to give priority to this celebration on Holy Thursday morning at 9:00 o'clock. The other important celebration, especially for young people, will take place here in the cathedral at 7:30 on Holy Saturday night; it is the celebration of Christ's resurrection. For me these two celebrations reveal the full beauty and depth of the spirituality of Holy Week, for in them we observe the unity of our church around her pastors, and we celebrate the resurrection of the Lord as a hymn of victory and hope in the Lord.

Dear sisters and brothers, even though we seem to be living in a dead-end alley, let us not lose hope. In the words of Isaiah, in the verses 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?» (Isa 50:2). Sisters and brothers, let us respond to these questions with an act of faith and hope: «Yes, Lord, we believe that you are the Redeemer, and that is why we have cried out with joy today in welcoming you: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!"» (Matt 21:9).

We are now 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.