

**HOMILY FOR PALM SUNDAY AT HOLY CROSS CATHEDRAL, MISSION ROAD,  
BENIN CITY ON APRIL 14, 2019**

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**INTRODUCTION**

My dear people of God, today begins the Holy Week in the Catholic Church. We give God all the glory, the author and finisher of our faith, for gathering us around his altar today as we celebrate Palm Sunday. It is a dramatic week where in we recall vividly the final events in the life of Jesus. Palm Sunday is the final Sunday of Lent, and commemorates the triumphant entry of Christ into Jerusalem, days before he was crucified. This is the week when the full price for our sins was paid and humanity was restored to friendship with God. It is the week when the greatest evil was perpetrated – an innocent man was killed for a sin he never committed. Holy week confronts us with the powerful symbol of the cross. By the cross we are reconciled with God; by the cross, our lives are transformed in the perfect love of Christ; by the cross Jesus' spirit of humility and compassion become a force of hope and re-creation in our hurting and despairing world. It is my prayer that as we begin the Holy Week our minds and hearts may be open to imitate Jesus by taking up our crosses with joyful obedience, seeking his justice in all things and embracing his example of loving humility through Christ our Lord.

**On the Readings (Isaiah 50:4-7, Phil. 2:6-11, Luke 22:14-23:56)**

The readings of today put us in the mood of what to expect this week. They beautifully sum up the paschal mystery of Christ – his suffering, death and resurrection. The first reading from the prophet Isaiah describes the suffering servant who will restore Israel's covenant with God. It portrays the servant-redeemer as a devoted teacher of God's word who is ridiculed and abused by those who are threatened by his teaching. The second reading from Paul's letter

to the Philippians sings the praise of Jesus' attitude of humility and obedience. Christ totally and unselfishly emptied himself to accept death on the cross for our sake. The Gospel reading read outside the church before the procession is from the Gospel of Luke and it recounts the glorious entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. The images in the Gospel reading are very symbolic. Jesus entered Jerusalem riding a young donkey, and to the lavish praise of the people who threw their clothes, and palm branches in front of him as a sign of homage. This was a customary practice for people of great respect. The use of a donkey instead of a horse is highly symbolic; it represents the humble arrival of someone in peace, as opposed to arriving on a horse – a symbol of war.

When we listen to the Passion narrative at Mass or read it in the quiet of our own homes or meditate upon it at the Stations of the Cross, we become aware that one thing and one thing alone, compelled Jesus to die on the Cross – and that is Love, Divine Love. The cross of Jesus is a testament to the power of love – a love so amazing, so self-sacrificing and so total; a love that is the most eloquent, most beautiful and the most perfect expression of God's love that there could ever be. God is love. He created us in love and died for us because of Love. How much love do we show to our fellow brothers and sisters? How much love do we show our spouse? How much love do we show our children? How much love do we show our parents? How much love do we show to the poor and the needy? Society will be a much better place when there is love. St. Theresa of Liseux says that, "If we want to live a life of love of God, we must not fail in our love towards our neighbor.

Another very striking part of our narrative today is the sudden departure of the crowd from shouts of acclamation to a call for the death of Jesus. Indeed it was a movement from the shout of "Hosanna!" to the shout of "Crucify Him". The same people who had laid their clothes on the road as "red carpet" for Jesus, were the same people who waved the red flag and gave a 'thumbs down' to him. Of course

we can look at the people with an eye of betrayal, until we realize that we are like those people. For us Christians, this shift in allegiance takes the form of a split between the faith we profess and the lives we live.

Are we faithful to Christ and his church when things become difficult, or are we “fair-weather” Catholics? Do we in our relationship with others turn our backs at our friends when they need us most? Have you identified with that brother or sister who just got sacked? Have you identified with that brother or sister who has nothing to eat? Have you identified with that brother or sister who is sick or in prison? Or is it the case that we relate with only those who are successful and who can help us in our times of need. When we turn our backs on our needy brothers and sisters, we act like the crowd in our narrative today and even worse than them.

Our call as we hear this passion account proclaimed is to embrace more fully our baptismal commitment to stand with Jesus; to become so one with him that our demands become fewer, our running from him becomes less quick, our faithfulness to following him and continuing his mission becomes stronger. Rather than denying Jesus, we are called to stand with him. Disciples go wherever the Master goes.

Coming to understand who Jesus is, his mission, and how that relates to us, his disciples, is no easy task; it takes a life time. Like Jesus, to be faithful followers by taking up our cross means we will feel this to the depths of our humanity. We will suffer, we will lose heart, we will cry out to God to take life’s miserable lot away from us. But also like Jesus, we have divine life that gives us the strength to carry our cross. It is divine life pulsing within us – which we first received in baptism – that raises up our humanity, enabling us to be faithful disciples carrying our crosses, faithful disciples consistent with our identity as Christians, as the Body of Christ. It is divine life that strengthens us to stand faithful with Jesus.

We are called to change our attitude today and turn a new live. For those who have been victims of betrayal let us learn from the example of Jesus on the cross who did not bother to count the offences against him but instead with his last breath, uttered the words of forgiveness, ‘father forgive them for they know not what they do’ (Luke 23:34 ). May God give us the grace to do this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

## **CONCLUSION**

My dear brothers and sisters as we begin Holy Week today and take palms home, let us be reminded always that we can fail the Lord like those people of Jerusalem and that we all need the grace and power from His passion to stay faithful and loyal to God. Palm Sunday and the Passion teach us that whatever lies in our future, Jesus has been there first. Jesus did not die to save us from suffering. He died to teach us how to suffer – with complete faith and trust in God. He knows and shows the way that will lead to Easter for us.

In the Catholic tradition, Holy Week is usually very busy and the events marking this week are usually stressful, but we should not run from them for each event bestows innumerable graces to those who participate in them wholeheartedly. I therefore invite us all to give our time and energy to the celebrations in the coming days as they all contribute to a joyful celebration at Easter. Our Lord Jesus is suffering for you and for me, and like the apostles of old; we cannot be far from him as he makes this journey for our sakes.

May the graces of this Holy Week be greatly increased in our lives and in the lives of our loved ones, as we ask the intercession of our Mother Mary, the mother of sorrows, to accompany us on our journey this week and all through life, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

**May God bless you all!**