

A HOMILY FOR PALM SUNDAY

About the Mystical Significance of the Feast

Brothers and sisters,

Today our Holy Orthodox Church prayerfully commemorates the events in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ which took place six days before the Passover of the Jews.

Obedient to the command of their Master, Christ's disciples brought Him a young donkey on which no one had ever yet sat.

They saddled it with their clothes, and the Lord mounted the ass, set off from Bethany, and headed to Jerusalem, where multitudes of Jews were already gathering from every land in anticipation of the greatest feast of the Hebrew liturgical year, Passover, or Pascha. On this feast the Jews celebrated their deliverance from Egyptian bondage many centuries earlier.

As the Lord approached the Holy City, a crowd surrounded and accompanied Him, while just outside the city another crowd assembled to meet Him. Both had heard tell of Jesus' miracles and especially His raising of Lazarus from the dead, which had occurred just a few days earlier. Anticipating that He Whom they understood in their own way to be the Messiah would immanently liberate them from bondage to the Romans and establish an eternal kingdom on earth, the simple Jews acclaimed Him with ecstatic shouts of "Hosanna!" meaning, "Grant salvation!" To show their jubilation, they removed their outer garments and strewed them on the road for the donkey to walk upon. In their hands they bore palm fronds and other branches, such as would be held when a conquering hero returned from victory and was cheered for his triumph.

A brilliant sun shone in the cloudless sky, illumining the bright faces of the people clad in their best white linen, but amid the rejoicing one face wore deepest grief. This was the most

holy countenance of the Saviour, Who could see beforehand the fearful events of the coming days, which entailed the final apostasy of His beloved Israel. In the same connection, the Saviour could not help noticing little groups of scribes and Pharisees forming in the crowds, whispering plans for His destruction. The Lord knew that under their devious influence, and that of the Sadducees and chief priests, the jubilant cries of “Hosanna” would very soon become wild screams of “Crucify Him! Crucify Him! We have no king but Caesar.” He foresaw that the splendid city lying before Him was about to have Him bloodily murdered, would revolt against its temporal overlords, and that the implacable Romans would not leave a single stone of it resting above ground. He understood that His own race would reject His supreme act of love, His voluntary sacrifice for their sins and those of the whole world, and that by this they would crucify Him a second time. The people He had chosen and specially cared for since most ancient times would perish, and for this cause Jesus would mourn...

Today, dear brothers and sisters, as we commemorate these momentous events and stand before His sacred Passion, our Christ also comes to us, now no longer simply as Teacher, but as King: a king not as the ever-inconstant Jews conceived, but as the everlasting King of our souls. *Tell ye the daughter of Sion*, said the prophet, *thy King cometh unto thee*. What and who are *the daughter of Sion*? On the external plane, as the worldly minded Hebrews understood, it is the earthly Jerusalem, built upon Mount Sion; but on the spiritual plane, the Christians comprehend it to be the human heart, which should be high and exalted, like the city of Jerusalem: it should be *a city set upon a hill*. Today Christ comes to each of you as *thy King*, to be enthroned in your heart. He comes unto *Sion His holy mountain*, so that you may meet His most holy Passion with purity of heart and utmost fervor and love.

In olden times, a victorious ruler would enter his capital seated upon a magnificent stallion or in a four-horsed chariot. But this *thy King*, O soul, *cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass, and a colt the foal of an ass*. He comes seated upon a beast synonymous with a humble estate and a lowly mind, to teach us to accept Him into our hearts with much humility. Being the King of Heaven, He seeks no kingdom below, except that He desires to rule over *the Kingdom of God* which *is within* us. He asks only, *My son, give me thine heart*;

so now, at His Passion if ever, let us give Him our hearts, without reservation.

The crowd acclaimed the Lord with palms and branches, which were probably branches of the olive, the most common tree growing around Jerusalem. The palm represents victory and the olive peace. Already Christ had shown Himself Victor over death by raising Lazarus and the others, and now He will raise Himself most gloriously from the dead, utterly vanquishing in His person our *last foe*, our own mortality. At the same time, *He is become our peace, Who hath broken down the middle wall of partition; having abolished in His flesh the enmity*; so, let us accept that peace and lay aside our enmity toward God.

Beloved Christians, this leads me to the last thing I want to speak about today. As we have already said and all of you know, we follow the example of the Hebrew people by joyfully greeting the Lord with palms and branches. Yet, why is it that they held olive branches, and we pussy willows? The reason for this is that the origins of our parish lie in the Russian Church, and in most parts of Russia, the pussy willow is the only tree to bud by this time. We live in a northern climate; therefore, the pussy willow is also one of our few trees that usually have budded by the present feast. When we are first given them, at the festal Vigil, we likewise receive a lit candle, which everyone holds until the end of that service and some bring back for the festal Liturgy today. If we reflect thoughtfully, we shall discern in this custom a profound, mystic significance.

When the Spring sun appears in cold regions such as ours, nature stirs from its sleep. The first proof of this is the budding of the pussy willow. This corresponds to how, after we have slept a long, cold sleep in the grave, Christ our risen Saviour shall appear, inconceivably radiant in the heavens, and our bodies will stir with new life. In the General Resurrection, the righteous will shine like the sun in the everlasting Kingdom of our Heavenly Father, illumined by Christ the Sun of Righteousness. The effulgence of celestial grace He will impart to us on that day is symbolized by the burning candles in our hands... But as for unrepentant sinners, perhaps best to say nothing about them, lest the bright joy of the feast be darkened. Nevertheless, we cannot help but remember them, for we know that although our branches have budded, because they have been cut, they will dry up, little by little. This reminds us of the words Christ spoke shortly before His Passion: I am the vine, ye

are the branches: He that abideth in Me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without Me ye can do nothing. If a man abide not in Me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.

God forbid, dear Christians, that we be consumed by the fire of the Lord's love on that day! Rather, may we be splendidly illumined!

And so, let us discern things great in things small, recognizing not simply the historical, but the mystical meaning of the symbols of our feasts. Let us open our hearts wide to Christ, that He may abide in us, lest we wither spiritually. May all of us bring forth in Him abundant fruits of faith and piety, leading a grace-filled present life that will bring us to a brilliant resurrection. May the fire of God's love not scorch us in eternity, on account of our rejecting the divine philanthropy, but may it warm and illumine us unto ages of ages.

As we return home after the service today, we shall put our palms and branches in a place of honor with our holy icons.

Every morning and evening when we pray, we shall see them there. May they daily remind us of the things about which we have spoken, that we may sing in our hearts to Christ our true God, "Unto Thee, the Vanquisher of death, do we cry: Hosanna in the highest; blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord!" Amen.