

2020 Palm Sunday

O nations, hear the word of the Lord,
proclaim it to the far off coasts.

Say: 'He who scattered Israel will gather him
and guard him as a shepherd guards his flock.'

These are words from yesterday's Responsorial Psalm but could allow us to appreciate how the Lord is guarding us! We sang at Lauds today and we can repeat now: "With palms, let us welcome the Lord as he comes. With hymns and songs let us run to meet him, as we offer him our joyful worship and sing: Blessed be the Lord!" There is joy as Christ enters the city on a colt; there will be sorrow as he leaves it carrying his cross! We have joy that he guards us so securely; we have sorrow that this guarding cost him so dearly.

Ezekiel's prophecy yesterday (Ezek 37:21-28), was a very helpful prelude to Palm Sunday. Everything that a human shepherd cannot do, the Divine Shepherd does. Others had tried to shepherd Israel: Adam, the patriarchs, the judges, the kings, the prophets, and the sages. Their efforts were paltry, partial and preparatory, falling short of the plan of the Divine Shepherd's heart. So he comes himself. The first person address in Ezekiel is outstanding:

I will make them one nation in the land...
I will save them from all the backslidings...
I will make a covenant of peace with them...
I will be their God, and they shall be my people...
I the LORD sanctify Israel, when my sanctuary is in the
midst of them for evermore... (Ezek 37:22-23,26-28)

He alone is the Good Shepherd who knows how to guard his people.

A guard is one who does what the inhabitants whom he is guarding cannot do. He takes risks that nobody else will take. He must take the first volley of shots, the onslaught of aggression from the enemy, the insult and cruelty of the oppressor that is justly directed at the inhabitants. Today Jesus comes to guard his city, his people, the nations, the world. He comes as the Servant of the Lord:

I turned not backward.
I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to those
who pulled out the beard;
I hid not my face from shame and spitting...
therefore I have set my face like a flint.. (Isa 50:5-7)

He does this for us. He is not afraid. He empties himself in our stead!

But the way the Shepherd guards us becomes visible only in the Gospel. There he empties himself of all his power:

There he is wounded for everyone...
There he is socially isolated for the sake of everyone...
There he is sick for the sake of everyone...
There he dies for the salvation of everyone...
He is forsaken by his Father for the sake of everyone!

It is a strange kind of guarding to manifest on one's physical body the blows and wounds that were actually meant for everyone else. Even the high priest Aaron used to have a scapegoat to send to Azazel in the desert! Always before and after praying deliverance prayers over people oppressed by evil spirits, we

invoke the Blood of Jesus upon us as a shield and protection. Jesus borrows our human flesh to do this for us so that he can return to us our human flesh in the Eucharist. So that we can do this for others!

We, by our baptism, have agreed to help him do this work of guarding. We willingly suffer anything he sends us: inconvenience, sickness, psychological and family wounds, physical pain and discomfort, if only we can replicate the same force of guardianship of the Body of Christ in our own humanity.

There is a story sent us by the Abbot Primate in his letter to all the Benedictine Monasteries:

“An article appeared in one of the Italian newspapers from a doctor in northern Italy who was treating patients with this virus. It reads more powerfully if I simply give the story to you as the doctor himself speaks to the journalist. In Italy, no one is free to enter a hospital to visit anyone – not a priest, nor a religious sister, nor a family member. This is a story about a priest who came to the hospital because he was sick with the symptoms of the coronavirus. “Nine days ago, a 75-year-old pastor came to us for medical help. He was a kind man, he had grave respiratory problems, but he had a Bible with him and it impressed us that he was reading the Bible to the people who were dying and holding their hands. We were all tired, discouraged doctors, psychologically and physically spent, and so we found that we were listening to him. Now we must admit: as human beings we have reached our limits, there is nothing more we can do, and more people are dying every single day. And we are exhausted. Two of our colleagues have died and others are infected.

¹ Marco Tosatti, “THE CRY OF A DOCTOR IN LOMBARDY. ABOUT THE VIRUS, DEATH AND GOD.”, <https://www.marcotosatti.com/2020/03/21/the-cry-of-a-doctor->

We realized that we have reached the limits of what man can do. We need God, and we have begun to ask for his help. We speak among ourselves and we cannot believe that we who were fierce atheists are now seeking for interior peace by asking the Lord to help us to resist so that we can take care of the sick. Yesterday the 75-year old pastor died. Despite the fact that in the last three weeks we have had over 120 people die in our unit and we are all exhausted and feel destroyed, he succeeded, despite his own condition and our own difficulties, to bring us a PEACE that we no longer hoped to find. *The pastor went to the Lord, and soon we will follow him if things continue like this. I have not been home for six days; I don't know the last time I ate something; I realize my own worthlessness on this earth, and I want to dedicate my last breath to helping others.*”¹

So from joyfully waving palm branches to our King as he enters his royal city, we also willingly and joyfully carry our crosses, making our own the opening prayer:

Almighty and ever-living God,
who as an example of humility
for the human race to follow
caused our Saviour to take flesh
and submit to the Cross,
graciously grant that we may heed
his lesson of patient suffering
and so merit a share
in his Resurrection.

[in-lombardy-about-the-virus-death-and-god/](#) accessed March 20, 2020.