

Homily
April 2, 2023
Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion
42:36 – 52:30

How many here have ever been to an opera? Raise your hands. My! How many of you have been to a Broadway musical, whether on Broadway or somewhere else? They have something in common. Both begin with an "overture." Now the overture is a stitching together of the varied major themes or melodies that you'll find either in the opera or the Broadway musical. They introduce it all. They tantalize. They invite you in. And then it unfolds to its conclusion.

Today, my brothers and sisters, we celebrate the overture to the next five days. This is the overture – Palm Sunday. And our readings today give us the basic melodies, the basic themes that will run throughout, until the conclusion on Friday.

Our First Reading is a part of one of the Suffering Servant Songs in Second Isaiah, that part that was written for those who were in exile. They were a people lost in a foreign land, struggling. And the prophet four times paints a picture of someone, an Israelite, who will through obedience to the will of God – innocent -- who takes up a vocation. And part of that vocation is suffering. There are many thematic lines that begin in our reading today and that play out through the First Readings this Week: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday. For on those days, we hear the first, second, third and fourth Suffering Servant Songs.

Our Second Reading Paul stole. It is the great kenotic hymn, (from kenosis) which means "to empty." He borrowed it from the Christian community. Yes. They had hymns back then. In the Acts of the Apostles, at some point you hear that Paul and one of his companions in prison were singing hymns together. These hymns were summaries of faith, of a very new faith in this One, Jesus. This particular one today describes how Jesus, who is God – that nature, the divine nature – emptied himself of that nature to take up the human nature.

But then, the one who is so human now – not abandoning the Godhead – but still yet human – continued to empty parts of himself. Recall. He went home to Nazareth with Mary and Joseph and was obedient to them. He went to the Jordan River, where he agreed to fulfill God's will, in baptism.

And thus, having set the pattern, he continued to empty himself. Any time that someone came to him, he stepped back, emptied a part of himself and became part of them. He emptied himself when he had to scold his own disciples and those who were just too stubborn to believe. And every time he did that, there was risk. And another part of himself was emptied.

He continued to pour and pour until the Passion today, where we see him empty again and again, some aspect of himself. To the point of pouring out his own blood for the forgiveness of sins.

- The overture for our whole week. We are celebrating. We have heard.

I would like to encourage us all – thus having heard and celebrated the beginning, the overture – to take up Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday, the First Readings. Read each of the Suffering Servant Songs, which are laid out for us in their entirety this week. You can find them on the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops website: usccb.org. All you have to do is go to the homepage, touch “readings” and each day’s readings come up. Ponder all of the qualities of this Suffering Servant. And how the Church sees in them a prophecy of the One who is the Christ. Wrap yourselves in what you read. Let it sink in. For perhaps part of what you read there is a part of yourself. For do you not suffer? Do we not all?

Emptying.

Have you ever met someone who’s full of themselves? You know, just bigger than life. And the world seems to rotate around them? They’re not real familiar with emptying themselves, are they? But that is to what we are called. Is it not?

Now, when I think of emptying, I think of the slow process of pouring a really good lager down the side of the glass. Or a very fine wine eased into the glass so it breathes and becomes the fullness of what it’s supposed to be. Or I think of an hourglass where the sands drip slowly, as it empties the top to fill the bottom.

To empty ourselves, my brothers and sisters – just as Jesus did – is a slow process. It takes a lot of time. And if you’ve ever noticed... “you know...okay I’m going to let go. I’m going to pour out this part of myself, this bad habit. I’m going to just get rid of it. This attitude. This whatever.” And you notice, you pour it out – right? And then when you tip it back up, part of it goes right back in. It’s still not all gone. There’s always a residue. But if we keep doing it, eventually we will have emptied that part of ourself to become more of a servant. More of the servant of the people of God.

So, we celebrate the overture today. May the rest of the week be filled with the themes, stitched together more and with greater body, even as we pour out before Easter some part of ourselves, which keeps us from being the servant the Lord has called us to be.