

CHRIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SPARTA, NC
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The Rev. J. Barry Kramer
"How To Handle A Palm Branch"

"Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord:" [BCP p. 270]

With these words we begin yet another "Holy Week." Why do we call it "Holy Week?" Because the word "holy" comes from the Greek word *agios* (*hagios*), which in its most ancient form meant "devoted to the gods." In the Latin it became *sacer*, sacred, or holy, as in a place, or "sanctuary." When applied to persons it meant "pious, pure." Thus if a thing or a person was holy, it meant they were "set apart" from the ordinary, reserved for special purposes, as in rituals; or, in Jewish and Christian thinking, designated for God's use.

From the very beginning of our Christian tradition, the events of this week that culminate in the death and then the resurrection of one Jesus, the Nazarene, were seen and observed as "special", as set apart from the ordinary. They were "holy" in the sense that these events happened to one who was later seen as God's Son, a "holy and pure" person. While they only happened once in time, they were so special that each event could be "relived" again and again; the spiritual power of this week could be brought from the past into the present. From the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, through the trial, conviction and crucifixion; from the celebration of The Last Supper through the appearances after his death, the words and actions of Jesus are remembered, and considered "holy."

Today we began our "Holy Week" with a ritual called "The Liturgy of the Palms." It recalls an event that would seem very "holy" even in the minds of the Hebrew people in the time of Jesus. It was "holy" because it recalled the glory of Israel. It fulfilled all the Scriptures. It was the arrival of the long-awaited Messiah, the "Holy One", who would deliver the Hebrew nation from all its oppressors. It was the return of God to God's people. It was apart from the ordinary. It was sacred and full of power.

The Messiah arrived in a strange way, riding on a donkey, the least esteemed of the beasts of burden. It was God's way of saying, once again, "I will choose what I will choose, with no regard to the values of humans." It was God's way of showing that "the last shall be first." The common people understood that and replied by celebrating with whatever was at hand. Thus they lined his way with articles of clothing. They broke off branches of palm and threw them in his path. But even here there was a ritual. The palms were not just tossed on the ground any old way. No, these were pilgrims on their way to the Temple for Passover, and that meant every action along the way had a special meaning. Every word and movement was "holy." In fact, it was a "holy tradition" that was centuries old.

It all started with the Jewish festival known as Succot: the Feast of Tabernacles. Similar to our American Thanksgiving Day, it was a thanksgiving celebration for God's divine protection and divine blessings. As you might suspect, this tradition goes deep into Hebrew tradition. It is described in the book of Leviticus (23:34-43).

This symbolic expression of gratitude for God's protection became the Succoth, the festive booth. The Succoth is a small hut covered by branches

instead of a mud roof. It is the replacement of a firm roof with something collapsible that matters. The idea is that a person steps out of the protection of his or her home, stands beneath the starry sky, and feels perfectly protected, just as the ancient Israelites did, because God is the guardian and protector.

On the eighth day of this festival everyone came together for a final offering, another "holy convocation." Each family brought with them to the Temple a cluster of special plants: a citron, a branch of the date palm, myrtles, and willows of the brook. These plants represented all the types of vegetation brought forth by the earth in that part of the world. The citron has beauty, smell and taste; dates provide food; myrtles have no taste but a sweet smell; willows have nothing exceptional about them but are known for holding water in the earth for long periods of time.

The rabbis saw a parallel to human society in these four plants: there are people full of wisdom and helpfulness; others may have knowledge but lack human understanding; others may be kind, yet lack great intellectual gifts; and there are those who have no traits of distinction, but are just simple human beings - they hold the society together. All of them form one great human family in which *all* are essential, and no one is expendable.

The following is the form of worship used at the "holy convocation" on this Jewish festival. Listen to the details and compare them with what we did this morning.

"The festival bouquet (described a moment ago) is brought to the Temple and waved during the recital of the Hallel, the Psalms of Thanksgiving (Pss. 113-118). 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord,' etc. As each word is recited the branches are pointed in a different direction of the compass - North, East, South, West, upward and downward. From the four corners of the earth, from above and beneath, have come God's blessings. God is everywhere and is to be thanked in every direction. Likewise God's power is over all creation: the heavens, the firmament, the winds and waters. All of this is God's, and therefore it is 'holy.' Then a solemn procession begins, each adult and child carrying a palm branch. The Torah is taken from the Ark; behind it walk the members of the congregation, palms in hand. It is truly humanity walking in God's presence.

The parallels are obvious. Granted, while the people who lined the streets of Jerusalem on that day may have combined the actions of another festival with those of Passover, their meaning was intentional. In Zechariah (9:9ff) the Scriptures told of the coming of a king who would save the people. When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the colt of a donkey, the people recognized his claim to that kingship - he was riding on a holy animal reserved for a sacred purpose. They reacted the only way they knew how - with palm branches and shouting. The people shouted "Hoshannah", which means, "save now!" They sang the Hallel, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hoshannah"! They didn't know it then, but it was the beginning of their first "Holy Week."

Today is the first day of our "Holy Week." You have learned the proper way to handle a symbol that we designate as "holy." You have learned how to handle a palm branch! Take it home and continue to handle it with care. Place it in a prominent spot, and each time you look at it during the coming year, let it remind you of all these things. Let it remind you first of that original Palm Sunday when Jesus announced to the world that God was about to save, once and for all, all persons from eternal separation. Let it remind you second of today, when

God was present as you gave thanks and praise for God's protection and blessings. Finally, let it remind you of the hope of the future, when the Spirit of Christ will make another triumphal entry, to bring peace into the lives of all persons everywhere.

"Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord: "Hoshannah"!