

PALM SUNDAY HOMILY 2009

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LESS THAN TEN years ago there was in our world one power that seemed to reign supreme, the super-super-power. For more than half a century it looked that way. Once this power was minded to intervene decisively in the Second World War, it was sort of obvious how the war would end up. And the end, effectively, was the ultimate show of physical power the world has yet known, the obliteration of cities with atomic bombs: a precedent for the later doctrine of The Pre-emptive Strike. Since then lesser powers, such as Great Britain and Australia, have felt safest hiding under the shadow of her wings, under the protection of that world power, the United States of America.

That world power became more inclined to throw its weight around, to intervene in other people's wars; and for many it seemed safest to go along with Big Brother, or at the least to offer what is called 'moral support'. Some of us are old enough to remember an Aussie catchcry from the illustrious reign of Lyndon Baines Johnson: 'All the way with LBJ!' Even then, that world power had bought into one conflict it found it simply could not win; but still it seemed safest to go along with whatever their emperor—sorry President—decided.

We live in a different world, where first the almighty power and then the almighty dollar have been humbled; and the rest of the world groans under the strain. The very earth itself refuses to lie down meekly and accept whatever muck is thrown up into the atmosphere. Nowhere seems immune to one or other of these three: drought, fire and flood; least of all our beloved Australia, so recently devastated in each of these modes. But we have also known a wonder of wonders: that once great power, the Super-power, has crowned an Emperor in new clothes: one who even dares flash before us his godly vision of a new earth stark naked of nuclear bombs.

It doth not yet appear what the Lord Obama shall be, and what his backers will bear with him doing. But he had a mighty entrance into the Jerusalem of the United States. Behold the conquering hero comes! Like others before him, this young Lord has still to go around riding not on a humble colt (as perhaps he would prefer), but enclosed by the biggest army known of protecting staff. There are, after all, precedents for assassinating a USA President who might seem too radical or big for his boots.

This New Age hero, unlike his mighty predecessor Franklin D Roosevelt, actually goes over to Macedonia, sorry Britain, to help. He goes to meet there the many powers great and small, more to listen, less to command. In advance there were rumours that he might be boycotted, told bluntly where he got off. But no, those angels the *media* tell us he has the crowds with him, that it is a good entry into that new-world Jerusalem where it is more important to be the servant of all than to be he who must be obeyed. Still, this is a canny young servant. He has done his theological homework: he knows that the male has no monopoly of the divine Image, for 'male and female created S/he them'. And who can resist the beauty of his manhood conjoined to such a fair spouse? Why, even in France they are greeted with joyous embrace!

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Where it will all end, God only knows. But on this day we remember another entrance into Jerusalem, one we may hope is more indelibly impressed on the heart of President Obama than on that of some of his less august predecessors. We call today Palm Sunday, in remembrance of how a Jewish rabbi and miracle-worker set his face to go up to Jerusalem, and the initial rapt enthusiasm of crowds that followed him. He knew this was a crisis. The

crisis of the Roman empire's vision of authority—which could come down like a ton of bricks on anything that seemed to threaten it—and his own vision of authority as the servant of divine love, friend of all the oppressed.

As Jesus takes to the streets to go up to Jerusalem, the City of God, already he has exercised the ultimate authority in heaven and earth: first, 'your sins are forgiven you'; and second, he has, in his own name, revised the law of God. But still the question remained, for them and for us:

Do we worship almighty *power*? Or do we worship the power of Love alone?

This Jesus, whom some are calling 'Saviour', has announced that the Reign of God is at hand, and asked his followers to pray for its coming. What is more, he has acted as if he had the authority of God: in his own name—he has forgiven sins, and revised the Law given to Moses. What has he *not* done, this young prince of men whom even the wind and the waves obeyed? He has not kept his hands clean, but has mixed with the most dubious company—and yet he has done nothing which seemed to soil his awful, unnerving purity.

Among his intimate friends, this Jesus has accepted that he could be called the *Messiah*, the liberator and king of the Jewish people. Yet what sort of a king is this?—he who so often seems to take sides *against* his own people. Remember that story he told where a Samaritan, a so-called heretic you wouldn't mix with, comes out as the righteous one, the truly human one? Anyway, Jesus kept warning them that this would be a strange victory, so much so they would want to disown him.

And now his time has come. This Jesus has set his face towards Jerusalem, the City of God, there to enter into his kingdom. There he will receive his insignia, his royal robes, his crown, and he will be enthroned King of Glory. But just as he dared to say 'I am meek and lowly of heart', and none of us could contradict him, so now he comes, see, lowly and riding on a young donkey. O, blessed Jesus, you should have a royal highway made for you. We give you what we have:



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we throw our cloaks down in your path, and palms from the side of the road. Oh, blessings on you, King Jesus, and praise be to heaven.

Praise and blessings indeed. But as we pause this day to remember the glory of that moment, we are to remember also what manner of king it is, that is even now ascending towards his throne. Palm Sunday is the beginning of what we call Holy Week, and that is how we must understand it. The authority of Jesus is too much of a threat for either the religious leaders or their Roman overlords to dare to take any risks. He must be silenced, he must be stopped once for all.

They think they are having their way, yet it is he, the one free person in that situation, carrying his burden and our burden calmly before him, who is having his way. He has sided with the transgressors—which is us all. He receives for his insignia the lacerations of his flesh as this rabbi is flogged like a slave. He receives his crown—a crown of thorns. For his robe he is robed in naked flesh; and for his throne he is lifted up onto a Roman cross of execution. Behold the man, behold the very truth of God. It is to him, who renounces all power except the power of Love, that is given *all authority in heaven and earth*. Then, indeed—as an ancient hymn invites:

Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and with fear
and trembling stand;
ponder nothing earthly minded, for with blessing
in his hand,
Christ our God to earth descendeth, our full
homage to demand.

Beloved, let us sing his praises!