



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

Palm Sunday – Year C

They spread their cloaks on the road before him

Readings: Isaiah 50: 4-7, Ps 21, Philippians 2: 6-11, Luke 22: 14-23: 56

I was gardening, one freezing winter day, in the quad of my seminary when the Principal, Canon (later bishop) Mark Santer emerged from the Lodge. 'You must be cold', he observed correctly. 'Here, take this. It used to belong to my Godfather.' So saying he handed me a large thick, all embracing clerical cloak, a vestment which has now barricaded me against the elements on my rounds and in freezing churchyards for nigh on forty years.

A strange beginning to Palm Sunday, I agree, but entirely Scriptural. As we hold our palms aloft for blessing and pin them up in our homes to remind us of the Passion, we should not forget the cloaks. The Gospels tell us that, as Jesus rode in triumphal procession into the Holy City, the crowds cut down palm branches and strewed them before Him but they also furnished the royal roads with their cloaks. It is a day filled with signs and symbols.

If we recall any history we probably remember Sir Walter Raleigh laying his cloak over a puddle to preserve the hosiery of Good Queen Bess.

We know that the Palms are, in Jewish tradition, a sign of rejoicing. They are among the signs used at the Feast of the Tabernacles when Israel remembers her time in the wilderness and sleeps outdoors to re-enact her utter dependence on God. We know also that the palm would not have been lost on the occupying power of Rome. The Palm was the sign of triumph, of victory, and that sign of the triumphant conqueror would have been noted. The Palm of victory became, in subsequent Christian iconography, that which the martyrs bore.

The cloak however has yet more to reveal.

The great prophet Elijah leaves his cloak, his mantle, as a parting gift to his prophet successor, Elisha. It is to signify that continuity of ministry in proclaiming the Word of God and it is also a vehicle of power. It is utterly identified with him and who he is.

Later on Elisha is given the task of anointing the future. He anoints Jehu as king and commands the extirpation of the corrupt paganising house of Ahab. The response of the nobles to this news is to take off their cloaks and lay them before the newly anointed king.

This image will not have been absent from the minds of Jerusalem Jews and those from the diaspora longing for the overthrow of Rome and the corrupt and brutal Herodian dynasty.

Also, in the Old Testament Law there is specific reference to cloaks. A poor man in debt must offer his cloak as a surety BUT you must give it back to

him at the dusk of the day because he will sleep in it. It may be all he has to defend him against the elements and the deep chill of the night.

You begin to see what is behind Jesus' radical call, in the Sermon on the Mount, to give to the man who takes your coat your cloak as well.

You cannot give more.

So also, in the history of the Faith in England, a cloak plays an important part. The Protomartyr of England, Alban, at whose shrine I was privileged to serve for five years, sheltered a Christian priest during the Severan persecution in the early years of the third century. Alban became a convert. The priest fled to safety as Alban donned his priest's mantle and acted as decoy. Refusing to honour the Roman gods and declaring himself for Jesus, he was martyred on the hill above Verulamium where stands the great Abbey Church and pilgrim shrine. The fugitive priest was thereafter known only by his nickname, Amphibalus – the priest's cloak.

More specifically the Gallican chasuble, the early form of what the priest wears at Mass over all his vestments to signify the seamless robe of Christ, the unity of His Body, the Church. In appearing in the chasuble Alban takes on the identity of the priest and becomes the sacrifice for Christ and in Christ. The cloak paradoxically reveals the true believer.

The cloak then is a key to identity. The laying of the cloaks on Palm Sunday at the feet of Jesus signifies the total giving of the person. It is an act of obeisance – that is to say homage, adoration, veneration, worship. God has declared this man to be king. We rejoice with the Palm. We offer ourselves completely in His service with our cloaks. 'Ride on, ride on in majesty', as the old hymn puts it.

The week's end will see a different order of triumph, a strange enthronement, a paradox of glory.

But consider, for a moment, if things had proceeded as the Palm Sunday crowd hoped. Jesus raised a rebellion. Against all the odds Israel was freed, Rome pushed back, the Herodians executed. It would have been a brief and glorious moment in the history of a tiny Middle Eastern nation, a footnote in history, a rerun of the Maccabees, but an event without consequence for the world.

Instead we see a triumph, not just over a secular pagan power – Rome is indeed converted, not by martial power but by martyrs' prayers, and becomes the centre of Faith. But we see a greater and unimaginable triumph, this time over the oldest enemy of Man, a cosmic victory over sin and death, an eternal victory in which all may participate. The whole sorry history of Man is recapitulated in Christ and Man is offered anew the liberation of Paradise and the benevolent governance of God. All that remains to us is to lay our cloaks, our very selves, in homage and adoration before the King of Kings on that royal road through the Calvary to the Risen Life and then we may truly wave the palm of victory and rejoicing without end.