



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

Palm Sunday Year A

'Shirts Off' Sunday

Readings: Isaiah 50: 4-7, Ps 22, Philippians 2: 6-11, Matthew 26:14-27:66

One of my companions on this year's Saints Way Rosary Walk was taken to her first ever football match recently. Not particularly keen on the outing nevertheless she returned bubbling with excitement and retailed the extraordinary events of, what turned out to be, one of the most exciting matches ever played in that stadium as, a disastrous defeat in prospect, the team turned it around and, with the last kick of the match, soared to victory in a deafening roar from the crowd and ecstatic scenes throughout the stadium. A month on I still replay the highlights with great emotion. A football match may seem arrange place to start a sermon on Shirt Sunday. But, if you want to know about the volatility of crowds, there is no better educator. The depths of despair can turn to the roar of triumph in seconds. The thrill of imminent victory turn sour and bitter in the blink of an eye. The crowd has a life and dynamic of its own and it is not always good. But, if you want to get the feel of 'Shirt Sunday' the soccer stadium is a good place to begin. The crowd arrive with high hopes, a readiness to believe in the impossible dream, their idols to be cheered which, if victory is the outcome, they will praise to the skies. But, if defeat is the outcome, then fury and resentment and rejection bubble up in an instant, often leading to violence.

Today we are winning. Jesus enters Jerusalem. The home team is ecstatic, full of expectation. They are limbering up for the final – the little Jewish underdogs are about to whip the mighty brutes of Roma and get even with those ‘glory hunter’ collaborators who support the Evil Empire without ever having been to Rome. (I’m sure there must be footballing equivalents).

There is, of course, one more startling similarity. When the goal is scored, as often as not, the scorer will wheel away in celebration and remove his shirt – in spite of this incurring an automatic discipline. The instinct is just so strong to divest and stand stripped before his adoring people. In Holy Week, of course, we begin on this Palm Sunday with the crowd - yes, waving their palms to greet the king – but, notice, stripping their clothes off to strew the way of Jesus as assign of homage to the imminent victor. Mercifully the Church, in her wisdom, decided not to include this particular practice in the liturgy. Palms it is and we can keep our shirts on. Later that week, when Jesus has failed to deliver the victory they wanted, He will be stripped as an act of humiliation. The altars of Christendom will be stripped in solidarity as Christ goes to what looks like utter defeat in the long awaited Final with those who wear the Sign of Satan on their shirts.

The cheering crowd becomes the jeering mob. The fans become the foes. The ecstasy curdles into disappointment and then explodes into rage and rejection. The Via Dolorosa will be lined with every measure of regret and every emotion of the human heart.

But today is ‘Shirt or Palm Sunday’. We anticipate the triumph. We, who know the result, year by year replay the script of the ecstatic hope, the

bitter defeat and the, by then unlooked for and astonishing triumph of the Risen Christ and the abject and terminal defeat of the Devil's team. We wave our palms. We may keep our shirts on but, in reality, there ought to be something of that wild, joyful celebration beyond words that binds us together in this most unlikely victory as we are bound together down the centuries with palm bearers of every age. With them we, all unlikely, share the glory. With them we adore the One who, for us, was stripped. With them we worship the One who, from the darkest depths of defeat and death has grasped the eternal victory and made us sharers in that glorious campaign. We are, incredibly, part of the team.

As we struggle daily to be fit to wear the shirt, we are day by day and week by week 'UP FOR THE CUP' or, as we call it, 'THE CHALICE OF SALVATION'.