

Palms: Symbols of Victory, Surrender, and Allegiance

"O Lord, grant salvation! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. . . Join in procession with leafy boughs up to the horns of the altar" (Ps. 118:25-27 NAS).

Palms were used in Old Testament worship. Old Testament law (Zech. 14:16-21) directed that each worshipper entering the Temple during the seven festive days of the Feast of the Tabernacles had to carry a citron in his left hand and in his right hand a palm branch tied to myrtle and willow branches on either side. During the morning worship all the worshippers, including children, shook their palm branches toward the altar. On the seventh day, "that great day of the feast" (John 7:37) the priests made a procession around the altar seven times singing "Hosannah." Thus, this day was known as "The Day of the Great Hosannah."

Symbols of Surrender

The icon of Palm Sunday shows children spreading garments on the road before Jesus. This reminds one of the twenty-four elders who cast their crowns before God's throne (Rev. 4:10). They were showing their submission and surrender. In ancient times a king captured in battle would cast his crown at the feet of the victor as if to say, "I surrender completely to you."

The branches carried on Palm Sunday were probably olive branches, common around Jerusalem. They symbolized peace, anointing, and victory. It behooves us to ask: What is the meaning of palms? Why does the Church bother to give them to us?

The meaning of these symbols is that Jesus comes to us today. Just as He entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, so He comes to us today in the Jerusalem of our souls. He seeks to become our personal Messiah and King. This can happen only if we offer Him our complete allegiance and surrender. Unless we surrender our lives to Jesus as Lord, He can never be our King. The palms are the sign of our glorification of Christ as King.

The History of Palm Sunday

The festival of the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem --- which is one of the twelve principal feasts of the Church Year—began in Jerusalem, was commonly celebrated in the Eastern Church, and from there spread to the Western Church sometime between the sixth and seventh centuries, where it came to be known as Palm Sunday.

A beautiful description of how Palm Sunday was observed in Jerusalem in the fourth century is given by Silvia of Aquitaine. She visited the Holy Land as a pilgrim and described it in her Diary. The Christians in Jerusalem would re-live each year Christ's entry into the city as it originally took place. After the morning liturgy at the Church of the Holy

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Sepulchre, the faithful would gather at 1 p.m. in the afternoon at the Church of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives. With bishop and clergy present, as the faithful were gathering, hymns and psalms were sung. The Gospel story of the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem was read. After all had assembled, a magnificent procession began toward the walled city of Jerusalem following the path Jesus took. The procession consisted of young and old, bearing palms and olive branches in their hands, chanting hymns and psalms with the constantly recurring refrain: "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." Even infants too young to walk, carried by their parents in the procession, held palms in their hands. Finally, at the end of the procession, followed the bishop with his attendants. In imitation of Christ, the bishop rode on a donkey. Winding through the city, the procession concluded at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre with the Service of Vespers. This age-old procession still takes place today on Palm Sunday with the Patriarch of Jerusalem and the faithful following the route Jesus took. This procession marks the origin of the festival of Palm Sunday with the blessing and distribution of palms.

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