

Today is the beginning of Holy Week and together with Jesus we journey from Bethany to the gates of Jerusalem.

The great crowd that has come for the festival of the Passover has heard that Jesus is coming. They come out to meet him and we, with them, wave our palm branches and shout 'Hosanna.'

Welcoming conquerors to Jerusalem in this way had been done before.

Historically there are accounts of victorious Maccabean leaders being greeted by crowds waving palm branches. The rededication of the Temple in 164 BC after a successful revolt, and the conquering of Jerusalem's citadel in 142BC are examples.

The implication that the crowd is greeting a conquering hero when Jesus enters Jerusalem is unmistakable.

Jesus however is not the type of hero or conqueror or messiah that they had seen before – he enters Jerusalem on a donkey, a symbol of peace and lowliness, not on an adorned white stallion that symbolises the glamour of victory won.

So here we are with Jesus at the gates of Jerusalem and we know well the horror that lurks within. The questions loom in our hearts: can we go with him into this place of Calvary and the tomb; can we go with him into this place of aloneness, betrayal and abandonment; can we go with him to this place of physical agony?

These are personal questions for each one of us to ponder, and as we do, we remember that we have the assurance that Jesus invites us to go with him. He does not want us to go back to the wilderness to fend for ourselves. He invites us to go with him into the days ahead and what they will bring, because he knows that these gates into suffering are also the gates into our redemption.

This week tells us that God is able to change everything about us - our fear, our sin, our guilt, our untruthfulness. But to receive this change, this transformation into wholeness in the actual circumstances of our lives, we will need to encounter and pass through our own paschal dying, and rising.

Walking with Jesus through Holy Week will surely be a journey of faith. Faith in the reality of the paschal mystery, and the transformative power that it unleashes for us.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul argues the difference between religion as requirements and religion as transformation. The difference between obedience to law and the righteousness of faith. The law is a necessary stage, but if we stay there, Paul believes, it actually becomes a major obstacle to transformation by becoming an end in itself. 'Whoever does the works of the law will live by them', he writes.

Religious requirements (in any religion) can for many who try to live by them, become the source of deeper anxiety because, humans quite simply don't have the power to obey them except in and through union with God.

Especially issues like forgiveness of enemies, nonviolence, self-emptying humble use of power, true justice toward the outsider, and others. We are simply not equipped when we go

it alone –remembering here Jesus words: *As a branch cannot bear fruit all by itself, unless it remains part of the vine, neither can you unless you remain in me.*

As we go through the gates of Jerusalem today with Jesus, nearly 2000 years after the first Easter event, we too journey in faith to meet up with our own paschal transformation in our suffering, dying and rising in the spirit.

Theologian Ronald Rolheiser suggests that when we look at this rhythm in the context of the entire Easter season of 50 days - that is, the events of the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, the Ascension and Pentecost, it may look something like this:

Our personal Good Friday experience can be our own loss of something of our life that has been part of us forever – old debilitating ways or habits, or hurts or resentments or injustices. On this day we can experience their death.

On Easter Sunday the experience of receiving a life without the old inhibitions, we can experience as the reception of new life.

The forty days before Ascension can be a time for readjustment to the new, and for grieving the old. We can experience Ascension as the letting go of the old and letting it bless us and the refusal to cling.

Then we arrive at Pentecost, the reception of new spirit for the new life that we are already living.¹

Viewed in this way we engage with the season of Easter just as it is meant to be – a season of dying, rising, and ascension to new life in the spirit of the one who goes before us and shows us the way.

May we enter the gates of Jerusalem today firmly attached to the vine that will feed and ensure our perseverance to the end, which, by his grace, will become our new beginning.

The Lord be with you.

¹ Kolheiser, Ronald; *The Holy Longing* Doubleday, New York. 1999. P 147