

# Holy Week speech

April 3, 2012

Most of the year, I know how to greet people. Seasonally, we can proclaim, "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Easter." Most of the time, around these parts, a weather word will do: "Man, it's hot" or "Hot enough for you?" or "Can you believe this heat?" If you know a person's predilections, then a sports allusion is appropriate, such as, "Sic 'em, Bears," "Hook 'em, Horns," "Gig 'em" or myriad other phrases that utilize the common-denominator "'em."

But right now—Holy Week—I fumble for words. Even though we know "the rest of the story" and recognize the joyous Easter Sunday coming up, I've always found Holy Week to be the most somber seven days of the year.

## **Exuberance, or agony?**

On the surface, Palm Sunday seems downright exuberant, if not ebullient. Just think about the crowds who lined the road to welcome Jesus into Jerusalem. They threw their cloaks into the road and laid palm fronds on the pathway, just to make the trip easier on his donkey, for crying out loud.

And cry out loud is what I feel like doing when I realize how badly that cheering throng misunderstood Jesus' calling. And that doesn't even account for how quickly they deserted him when they realized he wouldn't convert his divine power to military might and crush the Roman oppressors.

So, the jocular and mirth of Palm Sunday quickly evaporate, replaced by quiet, solitude, resolve and, eventually, abandonment. (By the way, when you read the miracles, do you ever wonder what happened to all those people whose limbs and lives Jesus healed? Did they decide to abandon him, too? Or were they conveniently somewhere else during this horrible week? Just wondering.)

Which is harder to ponder: How alone Jesus felt in the garden, when his closest friends couldn't even stay awake to pray with—and for—him? Or how alone Jesus actually was on the cross? Both drip with agony.

### **I was there, too**

And occasionally, I realize that, spiritually speaking, I also fell asleep in the garden and quietly vanished into the crowd at the crucifixion. God, help me! I can hardly take it.

So, wishing people a Happy Holy Week is absurd. Other useful words of well-meaning don't work, either—like "Pleasant" or "Joyful" or even "Expectant." Words like that anticipate Easter too quickly. They denigrate and deny Jesus' passion, his pain, his suffering, his aloneness.

Similarly, praying this week is fraught with peril if we do not pay attention. Of all the year, this is when we should ask God for hard times, for a rough week.

### **Predawn prayer**

The other morning, I ran in the dark. I thought and prayed about Jesus, the Cross, his death and, of course, Resurrection and Easter. The zeal of the moment directed me to request the deepest experience of Easter joy. Simultaneously, the analytical side of my brain called for contrast. What better way to appreciate the highest high than by enduring the lowest low?

So, as my feet pounded out a rhythm, my words tumbled out a prayer. "Lord, allow me to understand the depths of your suffering so that I might comprehend the breadth of your joy. Show me the darkness of my depravity so that I might squint in the brightness of your purity."

When I realized what I'd just requested, I stumbled and almost fell in the street. And I did not trip. Could I endure an answer to that prayer? I almost

took it back, but then I realized my heart desires what my mind doesn't wish to consider.

Maybe running through predawn darkness offered a metaphor for living through Holy Week. We struggle. We cannot see clearly. We do not know what is near us, much less what is far away. The end is beyond sight. Yet we trust we are running toward light, running toward the Light.

### **Prayer for you**

May you experience a thoughtful and reflective Holy Week. May you courageously ask God to reveal your true self to you. And may the blinding light of the Resurrection Morning cover you in the redemptive glow of Jesus' sacrificial—and sufficient—love.