

Here's a little story connected to the day we all anticipate – coming up next weekend. The local bar was so sure that its bartender was the strongest man around that they featured a standing offer of a \$1,000 bet. The bartender would squeeze a lemon until all the juice ran into a glass, and then hand the lemon peel to a patron. Anyone who could squeeze one more drop of juice out of what was left of the lemon skin, would win the money! Many people had tried over time (weight-lifters, longshoremen, etc.). But nobody could do ever squeeze-out one more drop.

Then one day this scrawny little man came into the bar, wearing thick glasses and a polyester suit. And he said in a tiny squeaky voice, "I'd like to try the bet!" After the laughter had died down, the bartender said: "OK." He grabbed a lemon, and squeezed away. Then he handed the wrinkled remains of the lemon peel to the little man. But the crowd's laughter turned to total silence as the man clenched his fist around the lemon and [6] six drops fell into the glass. As the crowd cheered, the bartender handed-over \$1,000! And then he asked the little man "what do you do for a living? Are you a lumberjack, a weight-lifter, or what?" The man replied, "No. "I work for the IRS!!" ... And his "feast day" is Holy Saturday, – April 15th --- although he's giving us an extension this year. And you thought the story was going to be about Easter!

That story, though, is really what we just heard in the Passion account, wherein Jesus is squeezed of every last drop of blood – for our salvation. Holy Week always begins with the two "P's" – Passion and Palms. The Passion speaks for itself. Today, I'd like to speak briefly about – the palm! These palms are rich and green, soft and pliant, yet hearty and strong. But they won't be green and soft for very long. In just a few days these palms will be faded and brittle, dry and crackling. The branches we hold are very much like our faith, not what our faith should be, but what our faith often is.

After the hosannas are sung this weekend, we'll probably tuck these palms away near a crucifix or a statue at home – where they'll stay. Almost overnight they will become brittle and dry, gnarled and largely forgotten – until sometime next year when we throw them out or, stick them in a bag and bring them to be burned for Ash Wednesday 2018! Our faith, (our belief in Jesus, our embracing of his Gospel) is like these palms.

On holy days, at milestone celebrations of the sacraments, our faith...might be as rich and green as these palms are today! But when our faith starts to pull at our consciences, when we hear Jesus pointing us in a direction we would rather not take; when our pursuit of the "American Dream" demands that we cut a few moral and ethical corners – we might discover that our faith is as brittle and dry and gnarled and forgotten as these palms will be in just a few days.

Once these palms have been safely tucked away until next Lent, it can be "business as usual." We'll return to our hosanna-less lives of struggle and multiple challenges and brokenness.

Many of those who waved the palm branches 2000 years ago to welcome Jesus in today's Gospel were the same folks who were either party to his death or stood-by silently as he was crucified on Good Friday. We who wave these branches today won't be party to his death, of course. But perhaps – we'll do worse. Maybe we'll look right past him – like we'll look past these branches within a few days!

On this Palm Sunday, may I suggest we keep the palm branch nearby as a sort of reminder. Don't put it out of sight – put it on your dresser or desk. And watch what happens. Is what's happening to the palm – happening to my faith life?

This Holy Week we have an opportunity to reverse – or restart – whatever decline has entered into our relationship with God --- even if we've done little or nothing so far during Lent! There's still time left! Tomorrow is the annual "Day of Reconciliation" through the metropolitan region from 3 PM to 9PM. It's an

opportunity of allowing God's mercy to "squeeze out" of our soul whatever isn't of God. It doesn't matter where you go (what church) but that you make use of the opportunity for Confession to be more fully prepared for Easter!

And the liturgies of Holy Week here and elsewhere offer the chance to reenter the life-giving Mystery of Jesus death and resurrection wherein He poured out every drop of blood for you and me as he walked the Via Delorosa (a song we'll hear at Communion time).

These palm branches have been ripped from the trees and are already fading away! But it doesn't have to be that way for us! This week – we watch – anew – what happens to Jesus – and what's supposed to happen to us! Let's try to squeeze out every drop of time we can for God this Holy Week! We can't avoid paying our taxes at the end of this week, but we can avoid slipping further away from Jesus. "*Now is the acceptable time,*" as St. Paul says. "*Now is the time of salvation!*"

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