

Phillipians 2:5-11 – “Take a Bow/Bough”
Palm Sunday – March 24, 2024

Take a bow. That order might be given by a conductor to his musicians after they had performed a rousing concert. It might be given to actors of a play after the curtain falls and the audience applauds. It might even be spoken by the emcee to an after dinner-speaker who has been well received by the audience. When we think of taking a bow, we imagine it coming from a performer, someone who has just done something. Today is Palm Sunday. This week we embark upon the most sacred, holy days of the year for the Christian Church. We meditate on what Jesus has done for us. He conquered the power of sin, death and the devil. He did it all by Himself. We had no part in it. We are passive recipients, by the power of the Holy Spirit, of all that He has done for us. Yet, in an extreme case of divine, dramatic irony, it is we who are called upon to take the bows.

That is the point St. Paul makes in the traditional epistle for Palm Sunday from Phillipians 2. After talking about our Lord’s state of humiliation on the cross, He turns to what we refer to as His state of exaltation and says, “*Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*” Using that passage for our text, our theme for today is, “take a bow.” As we reflect on what Jesus has done for us, we Christians take a bow: 1) in humility, and 2) in victory.

In the ancient world, and even in some cultures today, bowing was done not as a response to applause, but as a sign of respect and humility. Palm Sunday is all about our Lord’s humility. He entered Jerusalem not on a white stallion, but on an ordinary beast of burden. He was accompanied by no armies or brass bands, but by a group of ordinary Passover pilgrims. His purpose was not to exercise military might as an earthly king, but to rule in people’s hearts as their spiritual Lord. Later this week we will see Him wearing not a crown of jewels, but a crown of thorns. He humbled Himself and became obedient to death--even death on a cross.

His great work on our behalf should humble us. It should make our knees bow in repentance and sorrow. But that doesn’t come easy for us. Our world teaches us to be strong, aggressive, and self-assertive. We are conditioned to climb to the top of the pile. Being humble keeps you at the bottom. We want God to see how good we are, not how bad we are. People might think they can get through life by themselves, but they’re wrong. When death comes knocking at the door they will know that. When life has run its course in this world, we need someone to cover our sins when we stand before God. That Someone is Jesus. Believing in all He has done for us moves us to take a bow in humility.

Because of that, secondly, we can take a bow in victory. That bow is not just a verb, but a noun. It is not just spelled b-o-w, but b-o-u-g-h. It is a bough from a palm tree, the emblem of victory. In Revelation 7:9, St. John sees a glorious sight, a picture of the Church Triumphant in heaven. He says, *“After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice. Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.”*

When we take the bough in our hand on Palm Sunday, it is a reminder and foretaste of the day when we shall sing eternal Alleluias to our King. The Hosannas will no longer be needed, because He has then saved us fully and completely for all eternity. Holy Week itself is a picture of the Christian life. We live here under the cross until we live eternally with the Lord at the dawning of the final Easter Day. In that “in-between time” we continue to shout and sing *“Hosanna – Lord, save us.”*

Today is Confirmation Day in our congregation and in many others. This rite makes us mindful of the fact that we need the Lord’s strength and help in our lives to remain faithful to Him. Many have promised to *“suffer all, even death”* rather than fall away from the faith. Do we always take that promise seriously? Do we always take our sins seriously? Do we always take our Savior seriously?

The Good News is that our Savior takes His mission for us seriously. The week ahead reminds us of that. His presence every week behind and ahead of us reminds us of that. Because of Him, we can *take a bow*--a bow of humility, acknowledging by the Spirit’s power that this Jesus who rides into Jerusalem is your Lord and King. Then take another bough--a palm branch of victory, as we join the hosts of heaven singing praises. It is all possible because our Savior bowed His head and said, *“It is finished.”* He gave His life for us, and then rose victoriously. We wait now to celebrate the full feast of victory. Amen.

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