

Homily: Liturgy of the Palms

Text: Luke 19:29-40

When he was nearing his fiftieth year, Czeslaw Milosz, the Nobel prize winning poet, wrote a short note, reflective, perhaps, of that point in life when one becomes aware that whatever the future may bring, it will be shorter in time than what already lies in the past. Under the heading "Longing," he wrote these two, simple lines: "Not that I want to be a god or a hero. Just to change into a tree, grow for ages, not hurt anyone."

Standing alone, this note expresses a yearning we can all share, the desire to live, not extravagantly, but at length, with the kind of quiet majesty that trees slowly acquire, never intruding but, little by little, spreading branches, for shade, for nests, for the beauty of thousands of leaves that regularly mark time in a blaze of changing colors. To be just this would be enough – more than enough.

The note is even more poignant in light of Milosz's own experiences. As a young man he had managed to survive the travesties of World War II under German occupation in Warsaw, and shortly thereafter he was exiled from Poland by the communist government. He became a man without a country, whose only real home was his writing. Few could match his skills in observation, his deftness in description, his ability to put the world into words as brilliant as it was in itself.

But Milosz was always deeply aware that being a master of language carries with it a certain weariness, too, a corresponding inability not to see what is wretched and horrible as well. Trees make no noise. They are free of the struggles of contradictions and arguments and ready deceit. They offer a different testimony, without complication, without endless possibilities of deception. It's easy to understand Milosz' desire. Sometimes the only true virtues seem to be silence, patience, and endurance – to be an oak, sturdy and voiceless, blissfully ignorant of all the chatter that so unnecessarily disturbs us.

Saint Paul knew the same difficulty. He, too, was immensely able in capturing the world in words. Never stymied before what was glorious, he never shied away, either, from what was dispiriting and horrendous. Milosz dreamt of a space of innocence and benign existence, but Paul was completely unsparing. Inclined to great flights of rhetoric about the substance of our hope, he could, just as quickly, descend, to tell us the full extent of evil's darkness. By his description, the whole of creation "groans in travail." Having no voice does not free anyone or anything from the fractures of sinfulness. All things, said Paul, share the same bondage to decay, and if language is unavailable, silence announces, just as much as innocence, such grief and sighs that are too deep for words.

This despair is not hard to imagine in our own context, when so much talk seems manipulative and hollow, when words seem always turned to scheming, when so much of our environment, which cannot protest, suffers the degradations wrought by catastrophes and the greed of our human pursuits. Talk can cheapen the world, but, ultimately, Paul contends, silence is no refuge.

The fact of the matter, according to the Scriptures, is that we have been given the capacity to speak, and speech is a stupendous privilege. Our greatest destiny isn't limited to stoic endurance, making do as best as possible. We have a place above all others in creation, the ability not only to describe the world in all its complexity, but, more than all else, from first to last, to render it as God's and to proclaim that God's whole intention toward the world is redemption, sacrifice, and love. We have the ability, indeed, to mark our failures and all the indignities suffered throughout time. We can measure the depths. But, more than this, we have the opportunity, always and uniquely, to name a surpassing goodness, integral to all

creation, the goodness that arises from the providence of God, a providence shown most dramatically in the event of Jesus Christ – who was God with us, who is God for us and God for all the world.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem to the buoyant shouts of the crowds who recognized him as king, as the manifestation of the grace of God and the very presence of God's heaven, in that moment, as never before, our words matched God's promise. What was declared there was the perfect truth of the world, in songs of praise and gleeful cries of adulation and expectation. God was in our midst, as much a servant as a king, as humble as he is mighty, entering the city not as a conqueror, powerful and suppressing, but as the embodiment of peace, more interested in song than in arms. In that event, our voices measured the heights. Our joyful exclamations revealed the whole purpose of speech, which is to bear witness to such grace as cannot be quieted. The Pharisees, social manipulators par excellence, were concerned by the noise of the crowds. And, in one of the most eloquent ripostes of the Gospels, Jesus then noted simply that the peoples' shouts were of such integrity that, were they silenced, even the stones would begin to sing.

The story of Jesus' triumphant entry is often understood ironically, as a political event, which, as politics do, went awry. All the shouts turned quickly to humiliation and cries for crucifixion. But in no less a way, it remains a story of a different kind of triumph, for in the midst of jubilant celebration, we are reminded that words were meant for this, to be a means of exaltation and thanksgiving, meshing God's infinite devotion with the whole expanse of our world, which we record in ever-widening vocabularies of myriad languages. Talk may easily become cheap, or tawdry, or false. But the culmination of all our speech, its real moment, is the specific naming of every place that, in naming it, is identified within the reach of God's reconciling. To us has been given the gift of marking such inexhaustible grace, and our voices, ours alone, sing for all the world. Trees do not have this luxury. Only we can experience this marvelous freedom and responsibility, singing God home to us, lifting the world to God. No word should ever be spoken apart from this recognition, and every silence should be heard as creation's waiting upon our expression of gratitude and our unrestrained shouts of praise. This moment is our truth.

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