

Blessed Palm/Passion Sunday!

The word “Hosanna” means “save now”. It was a plea for salvation and an exclamation of adoration. If you waved palm branches or laid them on the road and shouted Hosanna for someone like Jesus riding on a donkey, you were hoping for liberation... in this case from the oppression of Rome.

Jesus will save, not with military power and might, but with humility and love and a cross.

What are you shouting Hosanna for today? What needs saving or our world or in our lives? Our lists are long.

On this Palm/Passion Sunday, I would like to share a story. A story about Father Elias Chacour. Father Chacour was a Melkite Catholic Priest... similar to Greek Orthodox, but in communion with the Pope in Rome. He received his first call in the village of Ibillin in the Galilee Region of Israel. Where Arabs, Jews, and Christians lived together. Chacour was an Arab Christian, with Israeli Citizenship. He was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize 3 times for his educational activism by starting a school and university for Jews, Muslims, and Christians.

In his book, “We Belong to the Land: The Story of a Palestinian Israeli who lives for peace and reconciliation in the Holy Land”, written in 2001 he wrote a chapter called Palm Sunday Prisoners.

On his first Palm Sunday, about 6 months into his ministry, he realized the thing his congregation needed most was reconciliation. One man in his congregation hadn’t talked to his sister in 20 years. Another man, an Israeli police officer, was a part of his congregation. He was hated and feared by almost everyone.

When asked by his bishop how things were going early in his ministry, Chacour said, “There are many problems in the village. People in some families haven’t spoken to each other in years because of divisive feuds. Christians and Muslims, Orthodox and Melkites often hate each other. People with different political ideas are bitterly fighting.”

Chacour once gave a sermon on ecumenism which was a complete failure. A parishioner came to him and said, “We don’t want it. Begin first to reconcile brothers and sisters, families together. This is what we need. We don’t want to be lost in vague ideas.

Those words stung the young priest.

On Palm Sunday of 1966 he woke up anxious and distressed thinking about celebrating the liturgy and Eucharist with the severe problems in his community. There were 250 people in church that morning, the most since he started, with others standing outside to get in. Chacour told his responsible to bring them in. People who were at odds with each other were forced to sit closer together.

As Chacour turned around after celebrating communion that day, which is about God’s forgiveness for us and for each other, he realized there was in reality no peace among his people.

So as church was ending he hurried down the center aisle, startling his parishioners, and locked the two main doors of the church. He came back up front holding the big key in his hands.

He then said, “I want you to know how beloved you all are to me and how saddened I am to find you hating and decrying each other. I have tried so often in the six months I have been here to help you reconcile with each other, but I have been unable to do so.” It was deathly silent.

“This morning when I celebrated the liturgy, I found someone who is able to help you. In fact, he is the only one who can work the miracle of reconciliation in this village. This person who can reconcile you is Jesus Christ, and he is here with us. We are gathered in his name, this man who rode in triumph into Jerusalem with hosannas from the people ringing in his ears. So on Christ’s behalf, I say this to you: The doors of this church are locked. Either you kill each other right here in your hatred and then I will celebrate your funerals gratis, or you will use this opportunity to be reconciled together.

10 minutes passed by and no movement.

The hated Israeli policeman stood up and said, “Abuna, I ask forgiveness of everybody here and I forgive everybody. And I ask God to forgive me for my sins.” This sparked a domino effect of hugs and tears among the whole congregation.

After everyone had been hugged, Chacour shouted, “Don’t listen to gossipers and to people who are only interested in seeing you dispersed, divided from each other again. Now you are one community.

Then he ended, “Brothers and Sisters, this is not Palm Sunday any longer. This is our resurrection! We are a community that has risen from the dead, and we have new life. He unlocked the doors of the church and set the people free through a bold move and the good news of Jesus Christ.

May you be liberated today from the sins of your past, may you be reconciled with God and one another, and may you know how much you are loved by the one who rode in on a donkey and gave his life for our salvation on a cross.

Have a blessed Holy Week.