

## **Palms**

Paul Turner

The Catholic faithful use palm branches at Mass on Palm Sunday and bring them home for devotional purposes. "Palm Sunday" is the popular name for the Sunday before Easter, though its full title is "Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion." Two Gospel passages are proclaimed at Mass that day: One tells of people waving branches or spreading cloaks to welcome Jesus in triumph to Jerusalem, and the other tells of his Passion and death.

Any branches may be used in the liturgy, but parishes usually provide palm branches, as mentioned in John's Gospel (12:13). The faithful hold them at the beginning of the Mass for the blessing and procession.

After Mass people may bring the branches home as a sacramental. Various customs have developed. Some place branches behind a wall-mounted crucifix or other religious image. Others cleverly fold them into crosses. Still others incorporate blessed branches into improvised prayers for protection during harmful weather.

Used palm branches are burned the following year, and ashes are placed on the heads of the faithful on Ash Wednesday. Some parishes burn their own ashes. People who wish to dispose of old palm branches may offer them back for burning or dispose of them at home in some reverent manner.

Palm branches appear in religious art as a symbol of martyrdom. In the Book of Revelation (7:9), a great multitude praises God with palm branches in hand. In the apocryphal Gospel of pseudo-Matthew (20-21), a palm tree miraculously bends over to nourish the Holy Family on the flight into Egypt, and an angel plants one of its branches in paradise, making the palm a sign of victory in any contest.

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