

Palm Sunday

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"WE MORMONS LACK 'JOY IN THE LORD,'" Bishop Lewis told his counselors and the ward secretary at the start of bishopric meeting on Palm Sunday morning. They listened attentively. "The name of Jesus is the only name under heaven whereby man can be saved, and we almost never say that name in church."

A dark purple banner hung on the wall of the bishop's office. About four feet wide and two feet long, it was made of shimmering royal purple velvet, with a rich border of light blue braid. On the banner in the same light blue shade in meticulous embroidery were the words, "WELCOME JESUS." The banner was suspended by braiding around a wooden rod sewn through the top side. It struck the viewer as unusual, but of high-quality and not garish.

Still, the sight of the banner left both counsellors and the clerk at a loss for words. No one wanted to dampen the spirit of charismatic innovation lest the potential for a religious treat be lost, yet they were vaguely uneasy as to whether the banner would agree with standard sacrament meeting protocol. There was silence in the room. Bishop Lewis continued.

"When sacrament meeting starts, the Primary children will come in carrying the palm fronds. The banner will already be up on the podium. We will hang it from the railing, on the right side where the children will be. Each child will be holding a palm frond during the primary part of the program. Then after they are done singing, half of the children will go down the left aisle, and half will go down the right aisle, in two lines." Bishop Lewis gestured with his hands to show a line going to the left and one to the right.

"When the first child in each line—the left line and the right line—reaches the back pew, then all the children will put the palms on the floor in the aisle." The bishop made the motion of placing a palm frond on the floor. "These palms are symbols of the Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and the banner is to welcome him. It will be just like the road going into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday," he concluded elatedly, as if he could

hear the joyous shouts of acclaim which accompanied the Lord into Jerusalem before the Feast of the Passover.

His counselors worked on their smiles. They wanted to give the plan—and their bishop—all due consideration in case it turned out to be confirmed by the Spirit. On the other hand, neither Brother Kealoha, the first counselor, nor Brother Wendel, the second counselor, wanted to move out in front of the Spirit by a premature show of support, should the bishop's plans start to make them feel uneasy. Only Brother Jones, the portly ward clerk, seemed confirmed in his reaction. His seasoned old countenance was set in a silent but unmistakable grimace which registered a firm "no." There was quiet in the room as the brethren paused in reflection. If the bishop had ever felt uncertain about the idea, he had certainly resolved all doubts by now.

"I had the palm fronds flown in from California. My daughter lives there," Bishop Lewis said as he rose from behind his desk and made towards the door to the clerk's office. He opened the door, and indeed on the counters, file cabinets, and all over the floor were boxes upon boxes of palm fronds. The rest of the bishopric stared in speechless amazement. The boxes were the long, narrow ones that florists use, and several had been opened to reveal slender, bushy fronds of green palm leaves. A faintly musty odor gradually seeped into the bishop's office. Between the palms and the purple banner, the counselors and clerk were politely and deferentially dumbstruck.

The first ward shared a building with another ward and a student branch. The same building also housed stake offices. It was rare that the halls were so quiet and empty. The early morning stillness and the uncertainty of the bishop's plans combined to produce an eerie silence.

Bishop Lewis turned to the others in anxious expectation. He searched their eyes for clues. They all looked back at him, but nobody knew what to say. If the "WELCOME JESUS" banner seemed dramatic, the palms were downright exotic, even to Brother Kealoha, who had lived the first ten years of his life in Hawaii. Bishop Lewis did not mention that he had also considered using unleavened passover matzo in place of bread for the sacrament but found after numerous practice attempts that it crumbled too easily if broken into small pieces.

Just then a knock at the door called the bishop out into the hallway. Sister Turnell, the Primary president, had received her instructions from Bishop Lewis a few days before. In fact, she had already run the Primary children through a practice on Saturday. She grew up a Methodist but joined the church at age thirty. Now a spry forty-seven, she was anxious to do exactly what the bishop had in mind and needed to clarify instructions for bedecking the aisles with palm leaves. Nothing in the bishop's plan seemed overly daring to her.

Brother Wendel used the break in bishopric meeting to take a closer look at the palms in the clerk's office. He had grown up in the midwest, also a Methodist, and this was his first personal encounter with palm plants of any kind. He touched the coarse, prickly stems with childlike curiosity. Most of the fronds were still green and pliant, but the airmail journey from California had taken a toll. Some leaves had already gone brown and felt rough and crackly to the touch. It seemed strange to Brother Wendel that these palm leaves from modern-day California might actually resemble the ones referred to in the Bible. The odor of the palms was strong in the clerk's office, dank, almost salty, but it gave an ordinary midwestern Sunday morning a vaguely romantic sensation—romantic enough to convince Brother Wendel that the palms and the banner would impress ward members to recall that on this day, about 2,000 years ago, the Savior entered publicly into Jerusalem for the crowning act of his mortal ministry.

Bishop Lewis returned to the bishop's office, and Brother Wendel took his seat in his chair. Neither Brother Kealoha nor Brother Jones had moved. Brother Kealoha spent the interlude quietly pondering whether a banner and palms on the floor of the chapel were suitable during sacrament meeting, even if it was Palm Sunday. Brother Jones just sat impassively with his arms folded, looking out the window.

Bishopric meeting resumed, and the discussion turned to other topics: Sunday school teachers, a calling in Relief Society, and an older sister who had recently become an annoyance during sacrament meeting by constantly getting up and down several times to go to the bathroom. Finally, just before ward executive council was to begin, Bishop Lewis returned to the issue of this morning's sacrament meeting.

"So, are there any objections to my idea?" he queried, looking around the room. By this time Brother Wendel was firmly in favor, while Brother Kealoha was mildly supportive, mostly because he did not want to risk offending the bishop. From the stony look on the face of Brother Jones, it was evident that his opinion was still the same.

"I don't see anything wrong with it," Brother Wendel said, shrugging his shoulders. "It's not like the kids are wearing costumes or acting out a scene. This breaks the mold of your average sacrament meeting and gives people something to ponder about on Palm Sunday."

"Exactly," agreed Brother Kealoha. "And the banner really isn't out of the ordinary anyway, because the primary often puts scriptures on signs during their sacrament programs."

Bishop Lewis opened a desk drawer and pulled out a thick black looseleaf notebook. "I looked in the *General Handbook of Instructions*," he said, waving the book in the air. "I find nothing which would prohibit palms on Palm Sunday. Oh, there is a sentence which says that 'pag-

eantry' is not allowed, but we're not talking about a pageant here."

"All right, let's play devil's advocate for a moment," said Brother Wendel, who was a lawyer. "Perhaps loose flora all over the floor poses a safety hazard. Will the church insurance cover it if someone slips and falls?"

Suddenly Brother Jones interrupted. "It's not a question of physical safety," he said heatedly. "It's a question of spiritual safety." Tension permeated the room as the others listened politely.

"You say the palms are a symbol?" Brother Jones asked skeptically. "Well, outside sacrament meeting that might be fine. But in sacrament meeting we already have symbols—the bread and water. Should we bring in competing symbols when we sit in remembrance of the Lord's supper?"

Brother Kealoha spoke up. "But our church is filled with symbols, we use them everywhere. No one thinks of them competing with each other. They enhance and compliment each other."

"But each in its time and place," Brother Jones retorted. "I suppose it will be a Christmas tree on the stand next."

"Are we limited to only the 'official' symbols?" asked Brother Wendel, looking straight at Brother Jones. Brother Jones just stared ahead. Brother Wendel continued. "Are we not allowed to use other gospel symbols? The image of the palms is straight from the scriptures—its scriptural. Christmas trees are pagan, from Scandinavia. I don't even like a tree up in the house during Christmas, but my kids want it so we always get one. It's in the New Testament where we find the symbol of the palms. Why can't we just have the palms and the banner in sacrament meeting on this Palm Sunday for anyone who might find it spiritually nourishing, and any one who doesn't like it can just ignore it. Give the members themselves the opportunity to ponder or reject it, but don't cut it out altogether just because its not what we normally do."

"That's not why I am against using it in sacrament meeting," Brother Jones responded, his eyes still fixed on the window. "It's pageantry and it detracts from the spirit of sacrament meeting. We already have the symbols there for the congregation to remember. That is what sacrament meeting is for. You can put on a play or performance some other time if that's what you want."

"So Jerusalem could welcome Christ but we can't?" asked Brother Kealoha.

Brother Jones unfolded his arms and turned to respond, but Bishop Lewis broke in. "I'll give you an example of how we should look at this," he said as if he were speaking to the whole group. "The *Handbook* clearly states that brass and percussion instruments are inappropriate for sacrament meeting." He tapped his finger on the *Handbook* for emphasis. "For

years, right here in our own stake, we have put on a handbell choir every Christmas. And we even have a special combined Christmas sacrament meeting—you know, Sister Pendleton directs and they all wear white gloves, red bow ties, and white shirts. Well, handbells are both percussion *and* brass instruments. So why is it that they can play handbells in the Christmas sacrament meeting? Here's why: because its a nice Anglo-European tradition and everyone likes it. That's how we celebrate Christmas in this stake."

As if to prove his point further, Bishop Lewis pointed again to the *General Handbook of Instructions*. "Do you think the Brethren really had it in mind to prevent Mormon congregations from playing handbells at Christmas time? No. Bells are virtually synonymous with Christmas. Why so? Are they mentioned in the scriptures? No. Unlike palm trees, bells are not even in the scriptures [this was incorrect]. So when it says 'no pageantry,' does the *Handbook* really mean to prohibit us from placing palms in the aisles on Palm Sunday? Why can't we start our own Palm Sunday tradition, like other wards have their Christmas traditions? After all, we give out flowers on Mother's Day right in sacrament meeting, so why can't we use palms?"

Brother Jones gave no response, and, anyway, members of the ward executive committee were now milling impatiently outside the bishop's door, already ten minutes past the time for the start of the next meeting. There are moments in church life when the normal rules of ecclesiastical decorum are subtly undermined. Committee members were standing slightly closer to the door and their countenances were slightly less deferential than would have been the case had they not been kept waiting for some ten minutes past the scheduled start of the committee meeting. Smiles and handshakes went all around as they entered the room, but an air of lingering tension remained.

The bishop asked the Relief Society president, Sister Dawson, to give the opening prayer. She stood and folded her arms as everyone bowed their heads. "Dear Heavenly Father, please bless us this day that our hearts will be filled with love for thee and for our ward members. They are precious spirits who long to return unto thee. Help us to know thy way, and what thou wouldst have us do in our callings. Bless the missionaries to be drawn to the pure in heart, and bless us all to do thy will. In Jesus' name. Amen."

"Amen!" they chorused, and the normal business of the ward executive committee was underway. A good spirit was just entering into the meeting when the phone on the bishop's desk rang. He picked it up.

"First Ward, this is Bishop Lewis," he said. The room grew quiet. After about ten seconds it appeared to some in the room that the bishop's face had suddenly gone taut. "Right now?— How about if I just come

there?— Yes, be right down. Bye.” The bishop put down the phone. “I need to run to the stake offices,” he said quietly. “I’ll be back, but keep going.”

The meeting continued, but without Bishop Lewis it wasn’t the same. Brother Kealoha conducted the meeting efficiently enough, but in absence of the bishop any decisions were only tentative and the discussion was incomplete. Besides, everyone wondered what emergency would cause the bishop to be pulled from a meeting, especially so soon before sacrament was to start.

Executive committee meeting concluded without any word from Bishop Lewis. As Brother Kealoha took his place on the stand, minutes before sacrament meeting was supposed to begin, he wondered where the bishop was and whether he should start without him. In point of fact, Bishop Lewis was at that very moment losing an impassioned argument with the first and second counselors of the stake presidency, presidents Watson and Blaine. Stake president Foreman was himself out of town on family business.

The day before President Blaine had received a disturbing report that the First Ward was planning to decorate the chapel with palm fronds and that it was going to hang a huge banner from the podium during sacrament. The banner, he understood, had the words, “WELCOME LORD.”

“Your information is wrong,” Bishop Lewis informed them defensively. “The banner says ‘WELCOME JESUS.’ What’s wrong with that?”

“I am not saying that there is anything wrong with the banner,” President Blaine said. “And I know you meant well. It’s just that pageantry is not allowed in sacrament meetings. And we don’t celebrate Palm Sunday.”

“Where does it say we don’t celebrate Palm Sunday?” the bishop asked. “We can devote a whole meeting to Mother’s Day or Father’s Day or even to patriots and pioneers at the Fourth of July and Pioneer Day. So why can’t we celebrate Palm Sunday? We even let Boy Scouts bless and pass the sacrament in their uniforms on Scout Sunday, but we can’t put down palms in remembrance of the entry of the Lord into Jerusalem?”

President Watson leaned forward in his chair. “Bishop, the other things you mentioned are all approved by the Brethren in Salt Lake. What we remember during sacrament meeting is the atonement and resurrection of Christ, not his death as in other religions. And we do not lay palms in the aisles to celebrate his entry into Jerusalem.”

“But that was the high point of Christianity,” Bishop Lewis argued. “It was the public acknowledgement of Jesus as the king of Israel.”

“No,” President Watson shook his head. “The Atonement is the high point of Christianity. And that we celebrate that with the bread and water in the sacrament. Our meetings are structured around the sacrament, not

other religious symbols.”

Bishop Lewis glanced at his watch. It was now several minutes past the starting time for the First Ward sacrament meeting. “But a bishop has the responsibility for sacrament meeting,” he said, implying that presidents Watson and Blaine were overstepping their bounds. If they caught his meaning, they did not respond.

“My counselors and I have planned this for weeks,” Bishop Lewis protested. “We paid money and have everything all ready.” This latter statement was not exactly true. The bishop footed the bill and his counselors had known almost nothing of the plan until that morning.

“Keep the palms and the banner out of it. You can still have the Primary kids sing,” President Watson said firmly. “And if the Primary wants, they can give the palms to the kids during sharing time.” Bishop Lewis was disappointed. “Look,” President Watson said gently, “I know you tried to do well by your ward, but it is just not appropriate to have the palms on the floor in the chapel or to put up a banner like that during sacrament meeting.”

“We can’t even use the banner?” cried Bishop Lewis. “What’s wrong with a banner? It’s not going to be hung from the podium, and the children won’t even carry it in. It will already be there, on the side, like when they put Primary scriptures on a sign.”

“But it’s not a scripture,” responded President Blaine. “It’s a message, and it’s not suitable for sacrament.”

By this time Bishop Lewis was plainly upset and exasperated. “My sister made the banner,” he said hoarsely. “I’m sure she did not mean to be heretical.”

“We know it was with the best of intentions,” President Watson assured him. “You’re a fine bishop, and we don’t want you to stop trying.”

Bishop Lewis walked glumly back to the chapel and found the Primary president. “No palms,” he told her. “Just have the children do everything else without the palms.”

“Should we still put up the banner?” Sister Turnell asked.

“No, just leave it in my office,” he said quietly. “You can use the palms and banner during sharing time in primary if you want.” He still did not agree with the stake counselors, but he did not want to mar the spirit of sacrament by disregarding their admonition. Disagree or not, Bishop Lewis recognized that they felt they were right, and that they were trying to fulfill their duty to see that things in the stake were done properly.

The First Ward had its Palm Sunday sacrament without palms. Bishop Lewis had once said that he was prepared to offend five people, but no more. In point of fact, he would have offended many more than five. Rumors of the plans had spread like wildfire after executive com-

mittee meeting ended, and by now almost everyone in the ward had heard of, and formed an opinion about, the palms and the banner. The palms seemed to be the main problem. One family declared that their children would not participate in the Primary program if it involved laying palms in the aisle. Even the bishop's reliable allies were against him on this one. Of the handful of supporters—and there were only a handful—they tended to be mid-life converts from Protestant churches, Saints for whom some drama and pageantry in worship had been put to good effect earlier in life to bring home the reality of the carpenter from Nazareth.

The palms were handed out in Primary class, and some, in fact, were dropped on the floor of the building by exuberant children with other things on their minds. Yet many of the palms made it home with families, and there were even a few observant Saints who saw in the green fronds a gentle reminder of the Palm Sunday acclamation to the mortal Lord, "WELCOME JESUS."