

BLESSING OF PUSSY WILLOWS

Entry into Jerusalem – Palm Sunday

On Willow or Palm Sunday we recall the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem before His passion. This day is considered one of the twelve Major Feasts of the liturgical year in the Byzantine Rite. It is always celebrated on the Sunday before Easter and includes the blessing of willow branches.

The blessing of branches usually takes place before or after the Divine Liturgy. The blessed branches are then distributed to the faithful as they come for anointing after the Liturgy. It is not uncommon to see Ukrainians striking one another on the shoulder on Willow Sunday with the willow branch and reciting the verse: “It is not I but the willow branch which strikes you to remind you that in seven days is the Great Day!”

Depending on the country or region, a variety of branches (palms, willows, flowers) are blessed for this celebration. Pussy willows seem to express well the liturgical symbolism of Palm Sunday. During the winter the willow tree seems to be dead. Yet, with the coming of spring, it sprouts and gives a sign of life. The willow branches bring to mind the wood of the Tree of the Cross, while the *buds*, a sign of new life, remind us of our own glorious resurrection. The blessed branches should be carried home as a sacramental, as a visible symbol of Christ’s presence. They should be entwined on a crucifix or used to decorate as icon. They serve as a “sign of salvation,” and a “pledge of protection and blessing” during the coming year as invoked by the second Prayer of Blessing. In some regions they place these branches into the hands of the deceased making them joyously ready to meet Jesus on the day of Resurrection. Let us then “come with branches and praise Christ the Lord!” (From *Matins of Palm Sunday*). “Hosanna! Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He Who comes in the Name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest! (Mt. 21:9)

