

**St Mary's 20-04-2017**  
**Palm Sunday**

**Psalm 118:19-29**  
**Matthew 21:1-11**

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, God our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Hosanna to the Son of David! Waving palm branches in the air and spreading cloaks on the dusty ground, we arrive at Palm Sunday. Today ushers in the most turbulent week of the Christian year. The week begins today, triumphantly, with Jesus entering Jerusalem ... but it will end in the dark tomb, its door sealed shut. The week ends, but the story doesn't - but we're not there yet. It's always tempting when we're so familiar with any story to try to skip forward. We know it so well - we don't need reminding; pointless to hear it again. But is it?

Today Jesus enters Jerusalem in triumph amid crowds waving leafy branches and shouting

'Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!

Jesus is entering into his inheritance, but not as a triumphant, conquering hero. Instead he comes humbly mounted on a colt, itself regarded as a symbol of peace. Of course the shouts and acclamations are not to be the climax but only the precursor to what will happen towards the end of the week. The welcome and hosannas of the crowd are but a prelude to the terrible cry of 'Crucify' that will fill Jerusalem before the week is out.

There are many things in this story: let's take a look at some of them. First we have the person of Jesus - he has become so important to these people. Because of what they'd seen him do, because of what they'd heard him say, this man was their king, and they treated him accordingly. They may not have fully understood what kind of a king Jesus was, but he was their king. He was their champion - he spoke up for them; he spoke to those who were outcasts in the eyes of society at large. This man embodied change; he turned things upside down. His followers were so sure life was going to be better for everyone. So much hope - that things can be different, that it doesn't always have to be this way.....

Then there's the colt, a symbol of peace, and it would carry Jesus into Jerusalem, the place of faith, the centre of religious life. And let's not forget the honours bestowed on Jesus - the cloaks laid on the colt's back, the palm branches and then yet more cloaks laid on the dusty road.

This day recalls how the people cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road as Jesus entered Jerusalem. Only John's gospel actually mentions that they were palm branches, and Luke's gospel mentions no branches at all: who knows what actually happened! But regardless of who's right or whether anyone's actually right about that first Palm Sunday, the image of waving palm branches is strongly etched in the memory of faith. The palm branch is a sign of eternal life, and in the Middle East the palm tree has always been a tree of honour. So Jesus' welcome underlined how important he was to the people.

Today also is about cloaks. Followers and members of the crowd laid their cloaks before him - one of the highest honours it was possible to bestow on anyone in the Jewish society of the day. Remember that a person's cloak was

their most valued possession - protection by day, blanket by night, and the means to carry heavy loads. It was the one thing which couldn't be taken in lieu of debts. Imagine what kind of state these cloaks would be in after they had been laid on a dusty, stony road, and trampled over! Trampled over by a man riding on a colt. The significance of these treasures being laid on the road should never be overlooked.

So this is a day which points towards better things to come - hope, peace, honour in the right places, and all happening quite properly in Jerusalem, the holy place, the centre of the faith community.

But we all know that it's not going to stay that way for very long. Love will change to hate. Maybe gradually, perhaps slowly but change it will and the crowd we see today will play their part in that change. Crowds can work away at making things change almost imperceptibly. Ask any politician, celebrity, or sports star and I reckon they'll testify that crowds, bound together in adulation, can quickly, oh so very quickly, turn nasty, especially if you fail to meet their expectations.

Yes, in the course of a week things will change so very desperately. Jesus, once the promise of change will become a threat, something to be got rid of as quickly as possible, not feted as a king. The hope of the crowd will vanish. They've been let down - at least that's what it feels like. This man isn't going to make the difference they had built their dreams on. Hostility now replaces hope: the hosannas of today are quickly forgotten. Soon 'Crucify!' will be the preferred shout. And there will be no sign of the colt or of the peace when he has to walk to Golgotha carrying his own cross. And Jerusalem, that centre of

faith, will by the end of this week have become a scene of utter devastation, the honours of this day quickly forgotten.

How things will have changed in such a short time! What will happen? We know, of course, what happens to him in Jerusalem. But let's not pick on Jerusalem. What place is there today with its values, its centres of power, its established institutions, that wouldn't resist strongly such radical realignment of values and relationships, of priorities and commitments, that Jesus teaches and models in his own life? Let's not make any bones about it - Jesus could be just as unwelcome right here in this part of the world, or in any part we might care to name. For what he stands for turns the values and perceptions of our world firmly upside down. The triumph of this day is soon to be replaced by anger and fear and disillusionment.

But then life isn't ever only about triumphs. There are times when we are in the depths, maybe sad, maybe frightened, maybe disillusioned. What then? Well then I think it's worth our hanging on to the belief that it may not be in the triumphs that God is known to his people, but in the failures, and the pain and the uncertainty of life. Perhaps Jesus knew that more than anyone in the days which lie ahead this week. That's when we truly discover that our God is not only for celebrations and high days, but for all time and every day, whatever may come our way.

A step on the journey of a faith which is seated quietly and deeply on our hearts: this is the real triumph of Palm Sunday for our time and every time. It's not about waving a palm branch, or a magic wand. Palm Sunday doesn't answer all the questions; it doesn't fix things; it doesn't mean that there will no longer ever be any doubts or confusion; it's not an insurance policy against

feeling pain and hurt; it doesn't guarantee that nothing will go wrong in life or that the powers in this our world will always get it right. Jesus was to know that more than anyone. When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, Matthew told of the travellers from the east who came searching for him. This news upset Herod and, Matthew tells us, all Jerusalem with him. Once again on this Palm Sunday Jesus is upsetting Jerusalem. Still today Jesus can and does upset people, not just in Jerusalem but in every place, with his challenges, his priorities, his expansive loving. Maybe it's good when we get upset, for maybe it's then that we truly see what the gospel is all about. Maybe it's only then that we are truly ready to walk with him along the Jerusalem road.

But for now we're hearing hosannas! It's a day of celebration, and a good day for a blessing on Austin and the giving of thanks - for we are richly blessed in our living this Palm Sunday and always.

Let us pray

Lord Jesus Christ,  
you called your disciples to go forward with you  
on the way to the cross.

Since you first walked that road  
countless millions have followed you.

In all that we do as your disciples,  
save us from false familiarity with your journey.  
May we never presume to step into your shoes,  
but make us small enough to fit our own,  
and to walk in love and wonder behind you.  
Amen