

SERMON 16.3.08

Bible Readings: Psalm 118: 1-2, 19-29
Matthew 21: 1-11

Today is a culminating point in the Lenten journey which began on Ash Wednesday, 6th February. We celebrate Palm Sunday. Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem is recorded in the four gospels (the Matthew account which we heard today in Matthew 21: 1-11; Mark 11: 7-10; Luke 19: 35-38; John 12: 12-19). It is the beginning of what is known in Christian tradition as Holy Week, the week which leads to Easter.

It's a time of the year which ministers and worship leaders find very intense, because of the preparations which take place to enable people to enter into the profound significance of the Easter events. Similar in a way to the concentration of activity at Christmas time.

The question which confronts ministers is: What fresh insights can be shared with people before they switch off saying, 'We've heard all this before!' That's one reason why we use symbols and creative experiences to lead people beyond the familiar elements of the story to reflect on its meaning.

Palm branches. Purple cloth to signify royalty – a king. Purple candle.

There are different layers of meaning in the account of Jesus entering Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. On the surface there is celebration and crowds cheering him as king. Similar in a way to many who will praise God at Christmas time and on Easter Sunday, when the atmosphere is exuberant with joy – but miss the darkness, the grief, the inexplicable horror of Jesus' suffering and death.

What lies beneath the surface of the Palm Sunday account?

The Passover lamb: Of course, it wasn't called Palm Sunday in Jesus' day. The date of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was five days before Passover, a special holiday. A time when Jews came to the holy city for the Passover festival. Jesus had gone up every year to Jerusalem for the Passover from the time of his childhood when he went with Mary and Joseph. He would have seen the lambs waiting to be sacrificed. On the day which would have corresponded to what we call Palm Sunday, each Israelite family chose the lamb they would sacrifice for Passover. Jesus knew. As the people shouted 'Hosanna' (which means 'Save us now'), they didn't realise they were choosing the Lamb of God as their sacrifice. As they welcomed him as their king, they didn't know that they welcoming their Passover lamb, 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.' (*John 1: 29, 35*)

Have you ever wondered how Jesus felt, riding into Jerusalem, as a king, and as one who would become the Passover sacrifice?

The significance of the donkey: Conquering kings would enter major cities riding war horses. The donkey symbolised peace and humility. Jesus' entry was a stark contrast to the war-like Romans, whose military presence was very visible in the Jerusalem streets. The vast might and power of Rome was emphasised right through Judea. If you go to Rome today, you can see the historic remains of many Roman buildings, the Colosseum indicating what wealth and supremacy the Roman Empire

stood for. Humility is not a quality that one associates with the rule of the Caesars. There were many Jews in Jesus' time who expected that when the Messiah came, the One promised by God, he would be a political king and a military strategist who would overthrow the Romans who occupied Judea. Get rid of them and free them from oppression.

Jesus did come as Messiah and King – but he wasn't in the mould of what was expected. In the crowd that day, hopes ran high. Expectations were rife. The shouts of 'Hosanna – Save us' really meant 'Hosanna – Save us from the Romans.' Kick them out. Give us what we want and need. The irony is that the Jesus who rode the donkey had come to 'save them' but not in the way that they expected.

The donkey – an animal not highly valued, but one appropriate to a prince of peace. That is why Palm Sunday has become a day when peace marches are held. There is a rally for peace this afternoon in Melbourne, calling for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to stop. The paradox of peace.

In late 2005, a Christian Peacemaker Team was captured in Iraq and held for 118 days, almost 4 months. On March 9, 2006, Tom Fox, one of the team members, was shot and killed execution style, and his body dumped in a residential neighborhood in western Baghdad. On March 23, the three remaining team members, Jim Loney, Norman Kember, and Harmeet Singh Sooden, were released by British forces. The captors had left before the soldiers arrived. The surviving team members refused to testify against their captors, and as a result, the people who murdered Tom Fox have been released. The reasons for not testifying include that their captors would be subject to the death penalty, and that they – like we – are involved in a struggle for survival.

James Loney writes in *Sojourners Magazine*, "We were given birth to give birth, and everybody is holy. The hardest birth of all is dying. . . . Our job is to allow God to breathe through us, together, in the mystery of incarnation . . . **And peace – the birthright . . . of every human being . . . I have come to cherish as the dearest and most essential of all things, even more than life itself.** The gun, the bomb, the military-industrial office chair, the words that carpet-bomb the garden God gave us to share: These are anti-Christ indeed . . ."

Have you ever wondered how Jesus felt, riding into Jerusalem, as a king, riding on a donkey, the symbol of humility, gentleness and peace, sensing the crowd's expectations that he could never fulfil in the way that they wanted?

The third aspect that lies beneath the surface of the Palm Sunday account is the question that the whole city of Jerusalem asked about Jesus that day:

'Who is this?' The identity of Jesus is at the heart of the Palm Sunday remembrance. The crowds answered, 'This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.' Is he really the Son of David? How can he be a king? 'Can anything good come from Nazareth?' (*John 1: 46*)

I believe that this question about Jesus' identity is the crucial question that will hang over our heads all of this week. We can choose to dwell on it or ignore it. But it won't go away. While the Grand Prix Formula 1 race happens this afternoon, while a peace rally takes place in Melbourne, while people of faith gather to worship in the millions of churches around the world today, while you and I go about our everyday, normal activities this afternoon – Jesus waits for people to decide what they will do about him.

Whether they will cheer him one day and be an enthusiastic follower, then turn their backs and be part of the same crowd that called out ‘Crucify him!’

Where are you in the crowd? Where are you among the disciples, one of whom betrayed him, and another denied him? Where are you in the scenes at the cross?

This week, journey with Jesus each day. Let him teach you what his suffering, death and resurrection means. Try to commit even 5 minutes a day this week, where we sit quietly, read part of the gospel story of the trial and the crucifixion, and pray. I guarantee at the end of the week you will be thinking more about Jesus, than you will about chocolate Easter eggs and hot cross buns!

Who is Jesus? A Roman centurion, who may have been there the day when Jesus rode into Jerusalem, was on guard the day of the crucifixion. Do you know what this proud, military leader said at the cross? ‘Truly this man was the Son of God.’ (*Matthew 27: 54*)

At the end of a huge day for Jesus, when he accepted the praise of the crowd with their shouts and palm branches, then went to the temple and cleared out the tables of the money changers and sellers, healed the sick, and engaged in debate with the religious leaders of the temple – he would have been on an emotional roller coaster. Do you know what he did? Verse 17 of Matthew 21 says that ‘He left them and went out of the city to Bethany, where he spent the night.’

Have you ever wondered how Jesus felt, as he went to bed that night? Was he exhausted? Was he afraid of what lay ahead that week? Was he thankful to God for the people who genuinely cheered him because they already knew him as Healer, Teacher, Master, Lord?

Today begins a journey that goes deep into the heart of God’s love for each one of us. To know and experience that love, you have to walk the journey to the cross and beyond that to the empty tomb. The shouts of praise will become the cries of agony. What was his prayer that night? What did he dream?

As we welcome Jesus today – into our lives, into our homes, into our neighbourhoods, into our church, into our community, may we do so, recognising who he is – the One who comes in the name of the Lord, the One who comes to save us from the self-centredness of our lives, the One who comes to heal our brokenness, the One who, as the Lamb of God, takes away the sin of the world.

Jesus, we welcome you.