

Virtual Church 28th March 2021

Palm Sunday

“Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom! Hosanna in highest heaven!” (Mark 11: 9-10)

Sing, read or listen to: StF 262 H&P 160 All glory, laud, and honour

<https://youtu.be/h3a8fTTrAdE>

Hold or imagine a palm cross in your hand as we pray:

**God of glory,
whose son Jesus Christ entered Jerusalem
to suffer and die:
may these palms be for us
signs of his victory;
and may we honour you
by acclaiming him as our king
and following him in the way that leads to eternal life;
for his sake. Amen**

**We ask your forgiveness, merciful God,
for we share in the sin of the world.
Though we claim to follow Jesus,
we go our own way.
Though we joyfully sing ‘Hosanna’,
our lives shout ‘Crucify him’.
Though we promise to be faithful,
our words and deeds betray him.
We are truly sorry for our sins.
As we turn to you now, in penitence and faith,
help us to know that you love and forgive us
and enable us to make a new start;
for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen (M Townsend 1996)**

Read: Isaiah 5: 1-7

Sing, read or listen to: St f 264 Make way for the Christ the King

<https://youtu.be/tK6XuYhL7JI>

Read: Mark 11: 1-14, 20-24

The Donkey, the fig tree, and the Kingdom.

‘Go and bring me...’ Many sermons have been written (and preached) about the interpretation of this passage. Some say Jesus *must* have made preparations with the owner of the donkey with the secret password “The Lord needs it”.

Others have seen a kind of miracle here – not only the exact foretelling of the place and reaction of the owners of the colt but also being able to ride a creature unaccustomed to a passenger. Anyone who has seen the patience needed to train an animal to accept a saddle will know how long and difficult a task this can be.

Much has been made of the motives of the crowd – calling to be saved (Hosanna means Save Now!) but wanting a mighty warrior.

Today I would like to look at some of the events in this narrative from a different point of view. It can sometimes be helpful to our understanding of Bible passages to imagine ourselves as part of the action. Can you picture yourself as one of the two disciples? Jesus picks you out specially to do this errand. You are given precise instructions – where to go and what to say – but no explanations. Would you go? How safe is it? What will you do if...? Do you have complete trust that Jesus has prepared all his life for this journey – or do you think he is politically and practically committing suicide?

Perhaps you are the owner of the donkey? Given instructions by a friend of Jesus to have the colt ready at a certain place and a certain time. A valuable asset and plenty of people probably looking for help on their journey to Jerusalem for the Passover feast. Are you happy and excited to be part of the plan for Jesus' triumph? Or are you anxious and afraid of being found out? Do you eagerly scan the faces of the crowd for signs of the messengers, or do you keep your head down and hope that no-one notices you?

And then there is the donkey! (I have a lot of empathy with the donkey) Can you imagine yourself as the colt in this passage? Never ridden (we use the word broken to indicate taming – are we broken-in or wild?) Are you nervous among the great crowd or do you take your cue from the master, calm and still amid the noise? Have you spent your short life expecting to be a beast of burden, carrying everyday bundles to and fro? Are you frightened by finding yourself the centre of attention – bearer of not only a king but the long-awaited Messiah? Do you understand anything going on in the world around you – the shouting, the waving, the press of people – is it all irrelevant to you as you carefully pick your way through the fabric and foliage at your feet? Perhaps you are stubborn with your ears back, needing a lot of coaxing?

We are all given a task to do for the kingdom of God. Some may be called to go and fetch others; some may be called to prepare behind the scenes and others to do the donkey work. All are important roles in the family of the church.

Now let's think about the second part of the account. In Mark's gospel the story of the fig tree is divided into two with the event known to us as the cleansing of the temple coming in the middle. Mark often makes 'sandwiches' of accounts to give impact, to clarify or deepen our understanding. At first sight this seems an account of an incident which is petty and difficult to understand. It is so unlike any of the other stories, accounts, and miracles that we know about Jesus.

Jesus had always refused to use his miraculous powers for his own sake. Remember the temptations? He would not turn stones into bread nor use his powers to destroy his opponents. Yet here he appears to use his power to destroy a tree that had disappointed him when he was hungry. Worse than this – the whole action was unreasonable – we are told it was not the season for figs. Why would Jesus wither the tree for failing to do the impossible?

The whole thing does not seem to fit Jesus at all.

It is possible, according to some scholars, that rather than a sequence of actual events, these may have formed part of a prophetic or symbolic action. A living parable or dramatic demonstration to make or teach a principle.

It may be that judgement or condemnation was intended but not on the tree, rather on what it represented. Israel is often referred to in the Bible prophecies as a living plant, a vine or tree. Perhaps the people of God – like the tree – seemed full of promise but without fulfilment. All their history could be regarded as preparation for the coming Chosen One. The tree was in leaf – showing all the signs of life, but it was not ready. It had no fruit.

Now I am no gardener, but some plants produce leaves at the expense of fruit especially if overfed. Even early in the season an experienced gardener would recognise that the tree had not 'set' fruit.

This picture of profession without practice, words without deeds signified by signs of life but no fruit is a summary of all that the New Testament highlights.

Holiness in living is not by keeping laws for show. It is by bearing fruit that a Christian can be known and will enter the kingdom. Matthew 7:16 says "... you will know them by their fruit."

It is possible that as the disciples passed along the road to and from Jerusalem with Jesus in those fateful days, he pointed out a dead and withered tree to them and said, "Israel is still fruitless after all the care and attention of the gardener (Luke 13:6-9), it will be as blasted as that tree!"

So, what do these two incidents among the events of the entry into Jerusalem have to say to us today?

The artful might say – don't be a donkey, be fruitful!

I prefer the adage – actions speak louder than words.

The symbolism of the triumphal entry – not a triumph in worldly ways – heading straight for death. Coming in peace, to save by giving up the one thing we all have in common, but in a way so uncommon. He did not buy his way out with riches or blast his way out with power. Jesus submitted entirely to the will of God by putting his life into the hands of others.

What difference does our life make? Are we fruitful? How will anyone know how important Jesus is to us unless it shows in what we do and say? Amen

Sing, read or listen to: StF 277 H&P 173 My song is love unknown

<https://youtu.be/bWRcAa-nFIA>

Let us pray:

Jesus – riding into Jerusalem on a donkey.

Loving God, we pray for the leaders of the nations and their peoples.

Jesus – sharing a last meal with his friends.

Loving God, we pray that we may be faithful and humble friends to one another.

Jesus – praying on the Mount of Olives.

Loving God, we pray for those seeking your strength and guidance at times of anxiety and fear.

Jesus – being betrayed by Judas, denied by Peter.

Loving God, we pray that we may remain faithful to you through all the testing times in our lives.

Jesus – being tried by the authorities.

Loving God, we pray for those who face condemnation for doing what they believe you want them to do.

Jesus – being crucified and suffering.

Loving God, we pray for those who are suffering physically, emotionally, and mentally.

Jesus – dying upon the cross.

Loving God, may we love you to the end of our lives.

Your kingdom come: your will be done. Amen.

Sing, read or listen to: StF 276 H&P 170 Lift High the cross <https://youtu.be/ephp3TVkPVY>

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, evermore. Amen.