

## Palm Sunday Sermon – Welcoming Jesus

The triumphal entry into Jerusalem! It was what everyone wanted! What everyone had been waiting for.

Except... maybe not everyone.

In fact, the disciples were probably dreading going to Jerusalem - Jerusalem, more than any other place in their travels with Jesus, Jerusalem would be the place where Jesus would clash with the establishment. Jerusalem was the capital of the Roman province of Judea, but Jerusalem was also the centre of Jewish power and the centre of Jewish religious life. Things were certain to come to a head, and in any conflict with the authorities in Jerusalem, Jesus and his followers would not likely fare to well – and of course, we know how disastrously things turned out.

Big things were happening.

And “As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples” (11:1)

Bethphage and Bethany were villages, but they were also more or less the outer suburbs of Jerusalem. The two villages were located just to the east of the city. Bethphage was the larger of the two, but Bethany was dear to the heart of Jesus. Martha, Mary, and Lazarus lived in Bethany, and it was there that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead.

And the Mount of Olives, where Jesus pauses and sends the two disciples ahead, is only about two kilometres from the Temple. In the final week before the crucifixion, Jesus and his disciples would travel back and forwards between the Mount of Olives and the Temple.

Jesus gives the two disciples he sends a strange instruction: “Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here.”

Two disciples – it seems that one person would have been enough to retrieve the colt, but Jesus never sent them alone; he paired them up. He sent out seventy disciples two-by-two; and on another occasion he sent out the twelve two-by-two. In a couple of chapter’s time (Mark 14) Jesus sends two disciples to make preparations for the Passover meal.

When we get in the book of Acts, we see this same model.

The teacher of Ecclesiastes observed, “Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!” (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10)

The event we know as the Triumphal entry was unlike Jesus’ other arrivals to Jerusalem. Jesus visited Jerusalem many times during his life. There were three festivals a year every Jewish man was supposed to attend: Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. But before this time, Jesus had always quietly entered the city without drawing any attention to himself.

But he knew that this time was the climax of his earthly ministry. He gave careful instructions for his disciples to bring him a particular colt. Matthew (21:2) points out that this colt was the foal of a donkey.

Jesus chose this donkey intentionally. It's hardly a grand animal. A horse would certainly have been more impressive. Better still, for a grand entry, a chariot would be the way to go. But Jesus chose a donkey.

And he did so to because he was fulfilling prophecy: About 500 years earlier, as we heard in our Old Testament reading today, Zechariah prophesied, "Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." (Zechariah 9:9)

Any other king would arrive in great pomp and circumstance. Three centuries earlier, Alexander the Great swept through the region, conquering all the surrounding cities. When he arrived at the outskirts of Jerusalem, the High Priest and Jewish leaders went out to meet him. According to the historian Josephus, the priests showed Alexander the scroll of Daniel where he predicted that a mighty Grecian king would defeat the Medes and Persians. Josephus wrote that Alexander entered Jerusalem with much fanfare.

But Jesus didn't enter the city in a golden chariot as Alexander is reputed to have done, instead he entered the city riding on a lowly donkey, showing he wasn't a conquering king—instead he was the servant king.

But he was still recognised as a king: After the two disciples took the colt back to Jesus and the other disciples at the Mount of Olives, they and the other the disciples threw their cloaks on it, and Jesus sat on it.

Then Jesus, riding on the colt set off for the last stretch of the journey. And as Jesus travelled, people spread their cloaks and the branches (maybe palm branches) that they had cut from the fields along on the road. It became a grand parade.

Mark tells us that those who went ahead and those who followed shouted,

"Hosanna!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" "Hosanna in the highest heaven!" (11:9-10)

They did this because they believed he would be the next great king. They'd either seen for themselves, or heard of Jesus' ministry: his miracles and his teaching. And they thought, yes, this is the one, the long-awaited messiah, the one who will restore the kingdom as it was at the time of David.

So as Jesus entered the city they shouted, "Hosanna!" which means "save now!" and had become by Jesus' time a way of identifying the messiah. They shouted, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our Father David."

The crowd expected Jesus to deliver them from Roman occupation. They believed this miracle worker would become a military leader and the economic king.

They were shouting “Hosanna” to celebrate his arrival. But I wonder if Jesus was smiling and regally waving to the crowds – he knew what Jerusalem held for him.

In Matthew’s account of Jesus’ approach to Jerusalem, he quotes Isaiah, warning, “The Lord says: ‘These people come near to me with their mouth and honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.’” (Isaiah 29:13)

Even today, many people think they are honouring God when they follow a set of religious rules. They can sing hymns and Sunday school songs from memory and quote the Bible, but if their heart hasn’t been changed, if they haven’t welcomed Jesus into their lives, God isn’t honoured. God doesn’t desire our obedience, so much as he desires our love.

So this entry into Jerusalem, this parade wasn’t really triumphal. Luke tells us that during his approach Jesus stopped on the road and looked across the Kidron Valley at the city - then he began to weep loudly over Jerusalem. He said, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you.” (Luke 19:42-44)

Jesus’ approach to Jerusalem wasn’t the first time the crowds had cried ‘Hosanna’. About 200 years earlier, Judas Maccabeus raised a Jewish army and led a successful rebellion to overthrow the Seleucids and reclaim Jerusalem. In 163 B.C. he rode into Jerusalem in victory and people lined the streets waving palm branches and shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” The Temple was re-consecrated, which is commemorated annually in the Jewish festival of Hannukah. Many believed Maccabeus was the messiah, but three years later he was killed in battle.

So when Jesus entered Jerusalem, the people were looking for another military leader to deliver them from the Romans – and over the next few days, when it became obvious Jesus wasn’t a military revolutionary, they turned away from him. Jesus was a suffering servant who was going to be handed over to the Romans. The people thought he had failed them, and they turned on him.

Later that week, when Jesus was arrested and handed to Pilate, Pilate asked him if he was a king. Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest[...] But now my kingdom is from another place.” (John 18:36)

Indeed, Jesus didn’t get involved in the worldly politics of first century Judea – although there was potentially plenty to be involved in – the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Herodians, the Essenes and the Zealots, although it’s the Pharisees and the Sadducees we hear most about in the gospels.

They tried to get him to speak out against the Roman government, but Jesus didn’t: When they asked him about paying taxes, he took a coin and said, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and give to God what is God’s.”

As Jesus approached Jerusalem, people laid branches and cloaks before him. The crowd cheered.

And then Mark's account of the ends quite strangely – it's very much and anticlimax: verse 12 tells us "Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve."

Jesus entered the city, went into the temple courts, and he looked around. That's all Mark tells us. At the end of his journey, and the end of this grand entry to Jerusalem. Jesus goes into the heart of the city – the temple. And looked around.

We need to think about what he saw. The temple, the temple that had been rebuilt by Herod the great, would have been the biggest and grandest construction in all of Judea. It was ornate, and rich with tradition and meaning. The priests would have been going through the age old rituals. But, of course, Jesus could see that their hearts were hard and cold. They were preoccupied with their own position in the temple hierarchy and in the wider society. Jesus had arrived, but they failed to recognise him as their messiah.

And we have to ponder: What would Jesus see as he looks around the church today. Yes, the one holy catholic and apostolic church in all its denominations and traditions, but also St Ives Uniting Church. We are the body of Christ – or at least we should be – but what do you think Jesus thinks of us. He loves us, of course, and forgives us for whatever we have done and do and might do... but if he looks at us, does he see people who are going through religious formalities, or see people who – individually and collectively – have welcomed him into their lives?

Jesus was the focus of two parades that week in Jerusalem. First, there was the parade that we know as the Triumphal Entry or Palm Sunday, a strange parody of a parade in some ways, with Jesus riding on a young donkey along a road covered with cloaks and branches. The people cried 'Hosanna'. And the parade ended anticlimactically, with Jesus apparently abandoned by the crowds and having a look around the temple before heading out from the city back to Bethany.

The second parade headed out of Jerusalem, to Calvary, with Jesus, hailed as messiah only days before, a condemned man, carrying his cross. Instead of cheers and cries of 'hosanna', it would have been mockery and jeers... and some tears from his followers.

Because welcoming Jesus isn't a one-off thing. For most of those people shouting "Hosanna" on the road to Jerusalem, it was a one-off thing. Join the crowd shouting "Hosanna!" on Sunday, then join the crowd shouting "Crucify him!" on Friday.

But if we truly welcome Jesus into our lives, he becomes part of our lives. We are changed. We do things differently because our very motives are changed. Peter tells us how special we become in his first letter (1 Peter 2:9), "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."

Today, we can wave branches, and lay down our cloaks and shout “Hosanna!”, but we must not just watch Jesus pass by, as those people on the Jerusalem Road did, instead we must welcome him into our hearts and our lives, and follow him, today and always.

Hosanna to the king of kings!

Amen.