

Sunday 5th April 2020 Palm Sunday

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God is love, let us adore God by sharing God's love.

God is ever present, around us and within us, though separate let us worship together in God.

Hymn God of mercy, God of grace,
 show the brightness of your face;
 shine upon us, Saviour, shine,
 fill your Church with light divine
 and your saving health extend
 unto earth's remotest end.

Let the peoples praise you, Lord
Be by all that live adored;
let the nations shout and sing
glory to their Saviour King;
at your feet their tribute pay
and your holy will obey.

Let the peoples praise you, Lord!
Earth shall all her fruits afford;
God to us his blessing give,
we to God devoted live:
all below, and all above,
one in joy and light and love.

H. F. LYTE (1793-1847) altd.

If you wish to sing this, you can use the tune 'As with gladness men of old'

Prayer

Eternal God ever present in creation, we offer you our praise and thanksgiving.

We bring to you another week in which life has been unusual and strange for many of us. Without the structure of the pattern of life we feel adrift, but you are with us surrounding us and indwelling our lives no matter how strange. As we look out of the window, we see familiar things and the sun has reminded us of the warmth of your love whilst we are separated from those we love. The breeze has reminded us of your Spirit blowing freely through creation, caressing new growth and clearing rubbish.

For your presence with us we give you our thanks and praise.

For the inspiration of your Spirit we give you our thanks and praise.

For the kindness of strangers and neighbours we thank you.

For modern communication that enables us to keep in touch we thank you.

For the story of Jesus, his life and ministry we thank you and on this Palm Sunday we offer you praise for the week ahead as we walk through Holy week reflecting on the depth of your love.

The Lord's prayer

Psalm 118:1,2,19-29 (Contemporary English Version)

Tell the LORD how thankful you are, because he is kind and always merciful.

² Let Israel shout, "God is always merciful!"

¹⁹ Open the gates of justice! I will enter and tell the LORD how thankful I am.

²⁰ Here is the gate of the LORD! Everyone who does right may enter this gate.

²¹ I praise the LORD for answering my prayers and saving me.

²² The stone that the builders tossed aside has now become the most important stone.

²³ The LORD has done this, and it is amazing to us.

²⁴ This day belongs to the LORD! Let's celebrate and be glad today.

²⁵ We'll ask the LORD to save us! We'll sincerely ask the LORD to let us win.

²⁶ God bless the one who comes in the name of the LORD!

We praise you from here in the house of the LORD.

²⁷ The LORD is our God, and he has given us light! Start the celebration!

March with palm branches all the way to the altar.^[a]

²⁸ The LORD is my God! I will praise him and tell him how thankful I am.

²⁹ Tell the LORD how thankful you are, because he is kind and always merciful.

Readings Zechariah 9:9
 Matthew 21:1-11

Hymn ALL glory, laud, and honour
 to thee, Redeemer, King,
 to whom the lips of children
 made sweet hosannas ring!
 Thou art the King of Israel,
 thou David's royal Son,
 who in the Lord's name comest,
 the King and Blessed One.

The company of angels
are praising thee on high,
and mortal flesh and all things
created make reply.
The people of the Hebrews
with palms before thee went;
our praise and prayer and anthems
before thee we present.

To thee before thy Passion
they sang their hymns of praise;
to thee now high exalted
our melody we raise.
Thou didst accept their praises;
accept the prayers we bring,
who in all good delightest,
thou good and gracious King.

All glory, laud, and honour
to thee, Redeemer, King,
to whom the lips of children
made sweet hosannas ring!

THEODULPH OF ORLEANS (d. 821) tr. J. M. NEALE (1818-66)*

Reflection

Most of us have a fairly vivid picture of the entry into Jerusalem, probably fed by Sunday School pictures, films and past services. The church has been quite good at doing Palm Sunday and I am sure many of you have Palm crosses from previous years. I wonder how many of us picture a rock-strewn dusty road with quite a lot of people travelling on it to get to the Passover Festival in Jerusalem or do we imagine a tree lined avenue leading into a suburban area?

Some years ago, during a Lent course, I invited people to remember this story, amongst others, and what we generally found was that all the stories were a merging of more than one source, some of them even biblical! The Bible gives us four accounts of this event, one in each gospel, and whilst there are some similarities each author had adapted for their specific audience and purpose.

Matthew's version is unique in suggesting that Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey and a colt, and I have often imagined Jesus surfing down the road with one foot on each animal and the reins held tightly in his hands. The other gospels simply mention a colt, perhaps taking the reference from Zechariah as reading riding on a donkey, actually riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

At this point, perhaps I have wet your appetite enough to invite you to read all four versions of the story – Mark 11:1-11 is the earliest version, Matthew 21:1-11 and Luke 19:28-40 follow, with John 12:12-19 being later still. To further help the comparison I have created a wordle for each version, this takes the text and creates a word picture where the more often a word occurs the larger it appears in the wordle. Have a look and see what you spot.

So, there are some similarities, but the emphasis is different in each gospel. In Mark, apart from 'colt and went' there are many words that carry the same weight but it is interesting to see what is not in that list – disciples, crowd, and of course donkey. It is also interesting that Mark and Luke feature the word 'said' whilst Matthew features the word 'saying'. Indeed, if we ignore the word 'donkey' in the Matthew wordle then 'saying, colt and Jesus' are the most prominent followed by some fairly predicable words such as Jerusalem, Hosanna, crowds, disciples, cloaks, and immediately. Luke the storyteller, takes a slightly different approach with 'Lord' being more prominent than Jesus and the disciples featuring more often, cloaks are there as is heaven but not Hosanna! John, of course, is completely different again with Jesus and the crowd taking centre stage and very little else appearing in common with the other wordles.

I don't know about you but one of the things that really strikes me is that there is no mention of Palm branches and when we look at the gospel stories we see that first and foremost it was cloaks that people laid down on the road. Their own clothing was offered for the colt to walk across. The other things that puzzles me is that we are only told the disciples were sent to the next village to find the colt, a village not Jerusalem; it could have been Bethany, but if so why not say that, after all it is mentioned in Mark and Luke, yet the text clearly says they were to go to the next village. I don't think I ever really noticed this before and yet I think it may be hugely significant, even in John's gospel the inference is that Jesus found the colt before entering Jerusalem. I don't have an answer to my puzzling but I do wonder how much more significant it would have been to borrow a colt from a village trader than a city trader?

I am also struck by the different wording put into the mouths of the crowds –

Mark - "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!"

Matthew - "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

Luke - "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!"

John - "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord— the King of Israel!" (but note this is what they shouted as they went to meet Jesus, before he had found the colt.)

The difference is subtle, for Mark it is the coming kingdom of David, for Matthew Jesus is the son of David, for Luke Jesus is a King, and for John Jesus is the King of Israel. What they are all sure about is that Jesus comes in the name of the Lord, and he rides a colt to fulfil prophecy. These are his credentials proclaimed by the crowd. They were credentials guaranteed to upset the religious authorities and the civil authorities, they threatened an uprising. John alone puts it into words of one syllable – The Pharisees watched and realised it was too late to shut things down and so the cascade of events which mark out Holy Week were put in motion.

What might have happened if Jesus had not found a colt, if the crowds had not lauded him? We will never know, but Jesus it appears was aware of the danger and he still carried on. I don't believe he wanted to be proclaimed a king or that he necessarily thought fulfilling prophecy was that important, it is more likely that the gospel writers thought it was important, but I do believe that for Jesus his message was so important that he was prepared to put his life at risk to ensure as many people as possible heard the truth about God's love.

The story of Palm Sunday may not be as clear as we thought but its message is clear. We have chosen to walk the way of Jesus, and this story reminds us that if we believe the message of Jesus is important then this way is not without cost. Life is risky, we are all too well aware of that at the moment, and we applaud those who put their lives at risk to serve others, however we need to remember this way invites us to think of others before ourselves, to love our neighbour, whoever has need, as one with us, and live our lives to share the message of God's love for all. Christians should not engage in panic buying, we should be examples of sharing and caring, and we should think of others by respecting the need to self-isolate whilst doing everything we can to care for others. We can show our love by putting a poster of a candle in our windows, and applauding from our windows and doorways at 8pm in support of those who are on the front line of this pandemic.

Prayer

Consider

Throughout the world people are walking into danger to serve others, doctors, nurses, police, armed forces, carers and millions of volunteers. What an outpouring of love.

Throughout the world, as life changes, we are rediscovering what it means to be human, reminded of our frailty and yet also reminded that God is with us through the love of neighbours and strangers.

Throughout the world communities are reawakening and a new priority is changing the way we view life.

Loving God, on this Palm Sunday, as we worship together and yet apart, there are no crowds gathered, no palm leaves waved, no colt walking through the streets and yet this story that we have shared reminds us that we don't need these things to follow the way of Jesus. The way of Jesus is the way of love, love for neighbour, friend or stranger, and love for our enemies. For love will overcome fear just as the love of Jesus overcame the fear of returning to Jerusalem and the fear of the cross.

In these strange times may we hold on to love, and whilst we self-isolate to protect others and give scientists time to discover a vaccine, help us to overcome the fear of this pandemic. Fear for our own lives and the lives of those we love, fear for the future, and fear of the unknown.

In these strange times may we remember those who do not have food, who must go out to collect clean water, who must walk tens of miles to access a doctor, who do not have the money to pay for medicine, children miss school not just at this time but all the time. People who are even more vulnerable to this pandemic than we are. May we remember and continue to support those who bring your love to these people in practical ways.

Loving God, we bring to those who are grieving for the loss of a loved one, around the world thousands have died and thousands mourn, their lives torn apart by loss. We lift to those within our fellowships who are grieving, may we support them in their loss. We think of all those who face financial struggles because of self-isolation. We remember friends who face challenges at this time, treatment put on hold whilst hospitals struggle to cope, those who are self-isolating because they are especially vulnerable, those who worry about the financial cost. We feel helpless, but the way of Jesus reminds us that we are not helpless, we are loving, and love can take many forms.

Loving God may your Spirit teach us to be open to new ideas, to hold onto the things we are learning or rediscovering through this crisis, open our eyes to the love which surrounds us.

In Jesus name we pray, amen.

Hymn Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us
 o'er the world's tempestuous sea;
 guard us, guide us, keep us, feed us,
 for we have no help but thee;
 yet possessing every blessing
 if our God our Father be.

Saviour, breathe forgiveness o'er us;
all our weakness thou dost know,
thou didst tread this earth before us,
thou didst feel its keenest woe;
lone and dreary, faint and weary,
through the desert thou didst go.

Spirit of our God, descending,
fill our hearts with heavenly joy,
love with every passion blending,
pleasure that can never cloy:
thus provided, pardoned, guided,
nothing can our peace destroy.

CCLI Song No.
JAMES EDMESTON (1791-1867)

May the blessing that is the knowledge of God, source of all being, the love of God discovered through Jesus and the inspiration of the Spirit which binds us together be with us on our journey this day and every day. Amen.