

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 28th March 2021
Palm Sunday

Collect

Almighty and everlasting God,
who in your tender love towards the human race
sent your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ
to take upon him our flesh
and to suffer death upon the cross:
grant that we may follow the example of his patience and humility,
and also be made partakers of his resurrection;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

Palm Gospel – Mark 11:1-11

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, "Why are you doing this?" just say this, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately."' They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, 'What are you doing, untying the colt?' They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were 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!'

Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

Philippians 2:5-11

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,

he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Sermon

It didn't have to be this way.

Perhaps that is not what we're expected to think about on Palm Sunday, as we are faced, first, with the story of Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and then with the passion narrative, in all its horrifying details. It didn't have to be this way. And of course part of the reason that we are challenged by this statement is because we know that Jesus is fulfilling the scriptures. Throughout his final hours, Jesus draws on passages from the scriptures, and identifies with the prophecies of, particularly, Isaiah.

If this is the fulfilment of the scriptures, surely it had to be this way. And for us, over two thousand years later, so familiar with the pivotal story of our faith, the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus, it is almost impossible to imagine that things could have been different.

This is what we are holding together on Palm Sunday. The difference between fulfilment or completion, and inevitability. The difference between the human and the divine. And as we do so, we are called to reflect on our own agency. On the part that we play in God's creation. The choices we have. The difference they can make.

Experiencing the liturgy of Palm Sunday is always jarring, because we are forced to confront the speed with which things changed for Jesus. As he entered into Jerusalem, there was support. The crowds were excited; hopeful. Some were probably anticipating revolution – for better or worse. Jesus is feted with palm leaves strewn before him as he enters the city on a donkey.

Of course Jesus himself isn't fooled. For some time he has recognised growing opposition. Anyone who challenges the status quo will have their detractors, and many of them will be powerful. And that's not all. As he enters Jerusalem, Jesus has the support of the crowd. But – and this is crucial – he isn't playing to the crowd. He knows – because he knows human nature – that the support can turn on a sixpence. And the path Jesus is following isn't one dictated to him by the need for populist support, but rather it is the path he has been called to by God.

Take a moment to look carefully. He is on a donkey, mocking popular triumphal entries, where the powerful are on horses. And that is because he has no intention of simply raising up other individuals to power. This isn't a revolution, seeking to replace one leader with another. This is the path of discipleship, which rejects power; which seeks equality; which calls on individuals to serve one another; which is defined by love.

On the one hand we have the divinity of Jesus, and on the other we see the various human responses playing out as the week progresses. Judas decides to betray Jesus. He didn't have to. We can only guess his motivation. Envy; the promise of a quick payout. The betrayal of the other disciples may not be so dramatic, but it is just as real. Their failure to stay awake; Peter's denial that he knows Jesus. Each are choices. And while staying awake may not have changed the course of events, imagine the difference it would have made to Jesus.

In a sense, we see a struggle played out in Jesus himself, as he faces the agony of what is to befall him, longing to change the course of events, yet knowing that his path must be God's path. The path of love, right to the end.

On Palm Sunday we come face to face with what is and is not within our control. We see that God will ensure that the scriptures are fulfilled. That Jesus will never diverge from the path of love, wherever that may take him. And we have the promise that, in the end, love will triumph over hate.

So much is in the hands of God. Yet we have our choices, too. At every stage, we choose our responses. We choose who we follow. We choose who we speak up for. We choose what we say and do.

As we reflect on our lives, we will all recognise times that we have got it wrong. It's inevitable, because we are human. Yet the path Jesus walks is not only a path of love, it is also a path of forgiveness. Just because we have diverged from it once, doesn't mean we can't return. We will always be welcomed back. We will always be able to make a different choice. That's what love means.

So today, as we watch a familiar story unfold before us, we reflect on where we choose to place ourselves within that story. And the difference it can make.

Amen