

Homily for Palm Sunday, 2021

Mark 11:1-11

'Welcoming the King'

Pastor Joshua Pfeiffer

*

INTRODUCTION

Many of you will know that old spiritual song:
'were you there when they crucified my Lord?'

It's memorable for its haunting refrain,

Were you there?
Were you there?

The implication in that song,
And in many other ancient hymns and devotional writings of the church,

Is that yes,
we were there, in a sense,

The full spectrum of humanity is represented and on display in Holy week,
And we are part of it,

it was our sins that lead Christ to the cross,
were you there?

It's is a rich spirituality I commend to you,
That of meditating on the events of Holy Week in such a way as to find yourself
in them.

And it begins,
Not at Jesus arrest, or trial, or crucifixion,

But ***outside*** Jerusalem as he enters on a donkey.

We could just as well sing,

Were you there when he rode into Jerusalem?

This is partly why we use palms in our churches on Palm Sunday,
To enter into this way of thinking.

Were you there laying down your cloaks and shouting Hosanna!

And if so,
How does it happen,
that you are also there,
When they crucified my Lord?

Having said all this,
as rich as this spiritual exercise is of finding yourself in the events of Holy week,

Far more important,
is fixing your eyes on Christ Jesus during this week,

What he does,

What he says,

What he suffers,

All for you,
For your forgiveness,
For your life,
For your salvation.

*

THE PREPARATION

The text begins with Jesus preparing his own entry as the promised King, The Messiah.

This is significant,
That what happens on Palm Sunday happens at Jesus' initiative,
When and how Jesus says so.

Throughout the Gospel there have been people wanting to force Jesus' hand in various ways,

And how often haven't we heard him order people not to tell others who he is.

But now it's different,
Now the time has come,

Now Jesus *himself* directs events and enters Jerusalem in a way that shows to everyone he is Israel's long promised King,
Their Messiah.

This is partly what the donkey is about.

Jesus and the people knew the prophecy,

*'Behold, your **king** is coming to you;
righteous and having salvation is he,
humble and mounted on a **donkey**,
on a colt, the foal of a **donkey**.'* Zech 9:9

So the donkey was how the King would come,

And it indicated something of his humility,
His lowness.

Imagine you were there,

Those two disciples begin sent ahead to prepare all this.

What are you thinking?
What are you feeling?

Are you worried the people are going to think it's a bit rich when they see you taking their donkey and you simply respond mysteriously '*The lord needs it, and will send it right back*'?

Or,

As one of those disciples have you learnt by now simply to follow the master's instructions,
Because he's shown time and time again that he's worthy of being trusted?

Or were those disciples beginning to connect the dots?

Were they walking together toward Bethphage and Bethany saying to each other,

Do you remember that prophecy in Zechariah about the king coming on a donkey?

You don't suppose that's got anything to do with Jesus do you?

But then you remember that not so long ago Jesus has said that when he went to Jerusalem,

He would be '*condemned to death, Mocked, flogged, And killed, before rising again*'. (Mark 10:33;34)

He had said even more mysteriously that he came '*to give his life as a ransom for many*' (Mark 10:45).

So you're thinking,

How does all that fit together with him now preparing to enter Jerusalem as the promised king?

This leads us to another little interesting detail in the text,

Which is the specification that the donkey be one '*that has never been ridden*'.

Why this detail?

Well it's hard to say for sure.

But one of the main places we find language like this in the Old Testament,

Is when it comes to the sacrifices,

And the animals which were to assist in transporting the ark of the covenant,
Including the mercy seat.

Those animals were to be ones 'on which there had never come a yoke',

'*untouched*' you could say.

The other place this language comes up is after Jesus' death,

Where we read that Jesus was placed in a tomb,
'*In which no one had ever been laid*' (Luke 23:53).

So perhaps even this little detail points beyond simply what's fit for the king,

But points to this King's purpose and mission,

He comes to be the once for all sacrifice for the people's sins.

*

THE WELCOME

Next comes the actual procession and the people's welcome.

The disciples quickly cobble together a saddle or sorts by placing their cloaks on the donkey for Jesus to sit on,

And the people seem to follow their lead by laying their cloaks on the ground,

Others spread leafy branches on the road too,

In John's Gospel we're told specifically these were palms,
Which is why we call this Palm Sunday.

Can you actually imagine doing this by the way?

I mean they presumably had a lot less clothes than we do,

And yet so moved were they by the presence of Christ Jesus with them that they took clothes off their body and put them under a donkey's feet,

Took the time and effort to go and cut branches down and lay these,

Just so that this King would have a fitting royal highway of sorts.

Imagine you were there,
Do you lay your cloak at the feet of Jesus' donkey?

Does your love and reverence for him as the Christ move you to so humble yourself,
And to so honour him?

There is Old Testament precent for this,

Consider 2 Kings 9:12-13,

'This is just what he said to me: "Thus says the LORD, I anoint you king over Israel." ' Then hurriedly they all took their cloaks and spread them for him on the bare steps; and they blew the trumpet, and proclaimed, 'Jehu is king.'

So Jesus is self-consciously entering Jerusalem as a King,

And the people are welcoming him as a King.

Then comes the great chorus of Palm Sunday,

Jesus is in the middle,

There are crowds following him all behind,

And crowds in front of him,

And they shout:

'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!'

These are words from Psalm 118,

Although with their own spin on it.

Hosanna is originally something like a prayer,

It means 'save us now!'

But it's also an exclamation of praise,

You see this king and you yell,

Salvation!

Salvation!

Victory!

Deliverance!

Hosanna!

Why?

Because this one comes not only in his person, in his own power and on his own mission,

In in the name of the Lord!

This is the one who brings the coming Kingdom of David!

Now,

That's their little spin on the words of Psalm 118.

They take the words of that Psalm which are all about the Lord himself helping his people,

And they combine them with the promise made to King David about the future King who would reign on David's throne.

So again,

Imagine yourself here in this crowd.

These people were oppressed in various ways,

Struggling,

Suffering,

And as Jesus came they saw in him the source of God's salvation,

The Lord's deliverance,

The promised Kingdom where the Lord had promised that his steadfast love would not depart (2 Sam 7:15).

What is the source of your burdens in life right now?

You too can look to Christ Jesus and pray for him to save and deliver you now,

But you can look confidently and even boldly praise Christ with these shouts of Hosanna!,

Trusting that in him the Lord will bring his blessing.

*

THE ANTI-CLIMAX

So Jesus prepares his own royal entry,

He is welcomed as a King by the people,

But then **finally** we see,
That the very last verse of this text is a strange anti-climax of sorts.

It reads,
*'Then Jesus 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 eh twelve'.*

Well,
That ended on a fairly mundane note didn't it?

Where's the next big moment of action int eh drama?

Where's the coup?

Where's the coronation?

This exuberant royal procession into the great city of Jerusalem,

Feels incomplete at the end of our text.

Imagine you're there with the disciples on the way back to Bethany.

What are you thinking?
What are you feeling?

What was all that about?

Are we going to do all that again?

What did it mean?

Why didn't we stay in Jerusalem?

Why didn't we march on the royal palace?

Is he the Messiah or isn't he?

What sort of King is this?

I wonder whether this anti-climatic ending to Palm Sunday in Mark's account, does also point us to the mysterious way in which this King will usher in his kingdom.

There is no coronation at this point?

There is no throne,

There is no crown.

So we're prepared for something different to come,

When there will be a crown,

But it will be one made of thorns.

And as Jesus takes that path,

The lowly path from Palm Sunday through his last supper, his betrayal,

His arrest,

His trial,

His crucifixion and his death,

Where do we find ourselves then?

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

One of the other theme you find the hymns and devotional reflections of the church,

Is that perhaps we're meant to understand it was those very same people from palm Sunday who shouted our 'Hosanna in highest!',

Who less than a week later shouted '*Crucify him, crucify him!*'.

*'Sometimes they strew his way,
And his sweet praises sing,
Resounding all the day
Hosannas to their King.
Then 'Crucify'!
Is all their breath,
And for his death,
They thirst and cry.'*

Is it possible?

Is human nature so fickle,
That the crowds could turn on him like this?

Well, look into your own heart?

How easy we fall back into those same old sins,

How quickly we relent of our strivings toward holiness,

How frighteningly frail is our human strength,

*'the spirit is willing,
But the flesh is weak'* (Mark 14:38).

Yet there is one in Holy Week,
And only one,

On whom we fix our eyes and see something strong and steadfast,

There is one and only one in Holy Week on whom we can place our trust and not be to shame.

For wherever we find ourselves on Palm Sunday through to Good Friday, 26 March 2021

The most important thing is that we find there Jesus,

Who knew the people would turn on him,
Who knew Judas would betray him,
Who knew Peter would deny him,

Who knows your weakness,
And yet goes to the cross for you.

Yes he is your King!

He is the Lord's promised Messiah and he has ushered in his kingdom,
And although it came about in a way the people could not have imagined,
it's an even greater kingdom that the people could possibly imagine.

Because as the Christ, King Jesus,
Comes to give his life as a ransom for many,

He sets his people free eternally,
Free from sin,
Free from death,
Free from the power of the devil.

*

CONCLUSION

So, were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Well,
Ultimately that's not the most important question,
Because our crucified Lord is risen,
And is with us now!

Finally, the most statement is not the question ‘were you there?’,
But the most important truth is the ‘he is here!’

The crucified Lord, now risen,
Has promised to be with us to the end of the age.

In his washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit,

In his powerful word of liberating absolution,

In his body and blood given with bread and wine,

The one who rode into Jerusalem to give his life for our Salvation,

Brings that very salvation to us here and now,

That’s why so often we take the words of those Palm Sunday crowds on our lips,

‘Hosanna in highest!

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

Hosanna in the highest!’

In the deepest sense we don’t sing these words to take our minds back to the first Palm Sunday,

But we sing them because we confess the same Christ Jesus who sat on that borrowed donkey,
Who hung on the cross,
Who came out of that tomb,

He is with us now,

So indeed,
Hosanna in the highest!

In the name of Jesus, Amen.