

April 9, 2017

THE SUNDAY OF PALMS

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Matthew 21: 1-17

It was Sunday morning.

The normal weekday work, which had been put aside for the Sabbath, resumed.

Jerusalem buzzed with activity.

In addition to the normal commercial activity of the city,
this was the Passover season and the city was filled with visitors.

In the village of Bethany, about three kilometres from the city,

Jesus and his disciples were preparing to go to Jerusalem.

As they walked along they approached Bethphage,
a village within sight of Jerusalem.

Jesus called two of his disciples to him.

"Hurry ahead of us into the village.

There you will find a mother donkey and her colt tied.

Untie them and bring them to me.

If anyone says anything to you,
just tell them that the Lord needs them,
and the owner will let you take them."

They did as Jesus commanded,

and when the rest of the group arrived they had the animals ready.

They threw a cloak over the mother,
but Jesus told them to put the cloak on the colt.

They did so, a bit apprehensively.

The colt had never been ridden;
if it had been broken to ride, it would no longer be with its mother.

But Jesus went to the colt, stroked it and spoke to it,
and then mounted it without any trouble.

As they left the village and approached Jerusalem,

the other pilgrims who were going into the city
began to spread their cloaks on the road ahead of Jesus.

Others cut branches from the low palms and spread them on the road.

And they began to shout,

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

The whole event attracted a lot of attention,

and as they entered the city
people who were already there asked, "Who is this?"

And the crowd replied, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

What did all this mean?

The answer lies in the claim that Jesus was a prophet,
and in the Old Testament prophecy that is quoted.

The people recognized that the entry of Jesus was a symbolic statement.

Matthew tied it to the prophecy of Zechariah,

in which the coming King, the Messiah enters Jerusalem on a donkey.

That's why the people made a carpet of cloaks and palm branches for Jesus;

they recognized that this was a symbolic claim that he was the Messiah,
and they responded to it.

Immediately after the Triumphal Entry

Matthew tells us about the cleansing of the temple

Matthew clearly wants us to see a connection between the two events.

Around the temple proper there was a great court, the court of the *Gentiles*,
where anyone could come to worship the Lord.

That court had been turned into a vast outdoor market

where pilgrims could buy the animals they needed for sacrifices

and could exchange their Roman coins for temple shekels,

which were needed to pay the temple tax.

The market met a legitimate need.

But Jesus had two objections to it.

First, it usurped the only place where *Gentiles* could worship God,

and second, it had become corrupt.

In practice, the merchants and money changers in the temple

had a monopoly which provided high profits,

for which they paid a fee to the priests.

God's place of prayer for all people had become a place

where the people of God were being robbed.

Jesus acted against that dual injustice.

He released the animals from their pens

and started them stampeding out of the court.

He overturned tables of the money changers,

sending shekels rolling

and the money changers scrambling to recover them.

Having taken this bold step, Jesus didn't go into hiding. Far from it!

He stayed in the temple precincts healing those who came to him.

Children, who had heard the cries of the crowd, continued to shout the same slogans.

"Hosanna to the Son of David," they cried.

To the priests, whose authority had been challenged and whose profits had been lost, those words were a terrible affront.

"Do you hear what these kids are saying?" they asked Jesus.

"Yes. Doesn't it remind you of what the Psalmist says about God,

'Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies

you have prepared praise for yourself'?"

Jesus couldn't have infuriated them more if he was trying to.

The events of Palm Sunday set the tone for the rest of the Passion week.

By the Triumphal Entry Jesus made a clear and open claim to be the Messiah.

By the cleansing of the temple he set himself over against unrighteousness and injustice, especially where it is carried on in the name of God.

During the rest of the week he confronted the Jewish leaders on their home ground, challenging them and showing

that they were not true to the intentions and direction of God.

By his parables and by his actions he put the leaders of God's people on trial, condemned them, and passed sentence.

Because they had failed God,

God would reject them and establish God's kingdom with others.

They responded to that by arresting him,

condemning him in a rigged trial, and crucifying him.

And Jesus made no attempt to counter their violence.

He went willingly to the cross,

laying down his life as an act of obedience to the Father.

And the Father responded by raising Jesus from death,

thereby publicly displaying God's acceptance

of the one who was despised and rejected

and putting the divine stamp of approval on the message that Jesus brought.

In the clash between Jesus and the Jewish rulers,

brought on by Jesus' attacks on their teaching and actions,

God took Jesus' side.

God declared that the voices that cried out on Palm Sunday

"Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord"

were speaking the truth!

The story of the cross of Jesus Christ is a simple one- tragic, but simple--

but the explanation of that story is given to us in many different images.

If we try to give any single explanation to that story, we fail to do it justice.

If we even insist that one explanation is primary,

we fail to do justice to all that God accomplished in the death of Christ.

That leads us to ask:

What images of the cross do we see

when we look at it through the window of Palm Sunday?

On the one hand, we are asked to recognize

that it was truly God's chosen Servant,

the promised Messiah, the Son of God who died on the cross.

The death of Christ was not the triumph of evil over good.

The death of Christ was not an accident.

The death of Christ was not a cosmic tragedy.

The death of Christ was an essential part of the plan of God

by which we human beings could be reconciled to God.
The cross was God's act of intervention in our world,
by which God's love comes to fullest expression
and God forgives all our sin and accepts us as his own children
because Jesus died for us.

In the cross God's grace comes to full expression;
in Jesus Christ God takes our injustice and transforms it into forgiving love.

In the cross God reconciles us to himself and destroys the enmity between us
by accepting us as members of God's own family.

In the cross God turns us from his enemies into his friends.

So the cross calls us to accept God's gift of love
and to open our hearts to receive God even as God receives us

.On the other hand, we are asked to remember

that the man hanging on that cross was the one who cleansed the temple of God. He was a
man whose heart of love could not tolerate injustice which hurts people.

He was a man who would act against injustice for the sake of those who were being hurt.

He was a man who would confront and challenge those

who were using their power to take advantage of the powerless.

He was a man who was killed

because he challenged the powerful and defended the powerless.

And he is the one who said,

"You are my disciples if you do as I command you."

So the cross calls us to accept the challenge of identifying with Jesus
as he identifies with the powerless.

The church of Jesus Christ is not called to be rich.

The church of Jesus Christ is not called to be powerful.

The church is called to care for all people,

especially for those whom others ignore and oppress.

Which means that you and I are called to be caring, loving people

who reach out to all those whom God brings into our lives.

Today we sing "Hosanna!"

On Thursday and Friday we move into the darkness that surrounds the cross.

And one week from today we celebrate again the glorious victory of life over death
in the resurrection of our Lord.

As we move through this Holy Week, may God touch our hearts

so that the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus may fill us

with gratitude for God's love and with determination to live as Christians,

the people of Jesus.

To God, who sent his Son into the world for our sake, be praise and honour and glory, now and
forever. Amen