



PALM SUNDAY

Reading: Matthew 21: 1–11

Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord; hosanna in the highest! (Matthew 21:9b)

What kind of king rides into Jerusalem on a donkey? Like most of Jesus' stories, something is odd. Something always has an unusual twist to it or is never quite what we expected it to be. Rotten sons are welcomed home with banquets and forgiveness. A Samaritan, traditionally an enemy of the Jew, is the one who helps the stranger rather than the priest who simply passes by on the other side of the road. The smallest mustard seed becomes a big tree. When this king rides in on a donkey then, our expectations are challenged.

Imagine that you are there on that day. Feel the excitement of being one of the crowd. Jerusalem is crowded with people come to celebrate the Pass-over feast. They crowd around you, their clothes brightly coloured, soaking up the carnival atmosphere. In the distance you can hear the sound of people shouting, but it's too far off to hear what they are saying. Gradually the sound gets closer and louder. Now you can hear: "Hosanna! Hosanna!" The noise of the people rises to a deafening roar and the dust, stirred up by their feet, gets into your throat, your nose, your ears and your eyes. But no matter, you are here. You are part of this great tide of humanity that shouts out praise and welcome to the king whom you believe has come to rescue you from all that's bad in society. Soon, dust ignored, you join in the shouting, adding your voice to all the others: "Hosanna! Hosanna to the most high! Hosanna to the Son of David!" Perhaps you are one of those waving a palm branch in welcome.

Suddenly you see Him, but wait . . . Surely a king would not ride into the city on a donkey? Surely He would come on a war-horse, showing His might for all the crowd to see?

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is remarkable. During much of His ministry He's exercised His power on the margins of society, amongst the poor, the outcast, the lepers and the sinners. Now He enters the political arena with an entry that not only will be noticed but is provocative to the authorities.

The Pharisees urged Him to rebuke His disciples. They'd heard that with Jesus would come trouble, but now they saw and heard for themselves, first hand. His disciples are proclaiming Him king, and not just any king, but the Messiah! The one who would re-establish the Davidic kingdom and restore the country's glorious past. This was both political and re-



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religious trouble. Jesus' response is to tell them that if the people keep quiet then the very stones will cry out.

The excitement from the people is tangible! This king will bring freedom to Israel – independence from the Roman ruling authorities. The last time that Israel had been independent was a hundred years previously, when Judah Maccabeus, nick-named 'the hammer' and regarded as one of the greatest warriors in Jewish history, had led the people to victory and was crowned king. When he became king he had an image of a palm branch on the coinage, and this was used to celebrate victory over Rome. The crowds use of palm branches as Jesus rode into the city was symbolic.

Palm Sunday is the start of Holy Week. It's the start of the final enactment of God's plan of Redemption. Jesus enters Jerusalem in such a simple manner, yet here is the One who will take the sins of the whole world on Himself. The important point is that here is the ruler of the universe fulfilling His mission, riding on a borrowed donkey. In just a few days time He will give up everything on the cross at Calvary, sacrificing Himself in our place. This One, who rules from a cross and rises from the dead, leaves behind an empty tomb except for His burial shroud. Surely, if this is how the glory of God expresses itself in its fullness, perhaps we have no need to fear anything at all as long as we accept Jesus for who He is, recognising what He has done for us.

Perhaps we might even join in with that crowd, shouting out, ***Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!*** We might thank God that, even amid the struggles that we face today, we are not part of a dying church but a growing and evolving church. Christ is doing a new thing with His church. If indeed the church of today is to be reduced to a pile of stones, then perhaps, if we listen with our hearts, we will hear the stones crying out in praise of His kingship and glory. Maybe it will be these very stones who will welcome the grand procession led by angels, to welcome the final coming of the risen Christ; the Christ who walks on wounded feet, who, with wounded hands, will proclaim a peace without end, a kingdom without end, in a world without end.

Amen

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