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Hosanna to the King

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This week's bible reading is from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 21 verses 1 - 13.

Introduction

The story of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, whilst the people lined the streets waving palm branches and shouting "hosanna!", is one which we are all familiar with. It's a lively, joyful picture, which belies the horror and suffering that is to come. In fact it's a story we're so familiar with, it's easy to forget the deeper meaning and significance of this event. So let's have a closer look at just what took place on the day we now call, "Palm Sunday".

Hosanna

Although Israel has many local synagogues in the various towns and villages, the Temple in Jerusalem was still the only place where you could legally offer your sacrifice. So at the time of the Feast of Passover, where every family had to sacrifice the Passover Lamb, Jerusalem became a busy and bustling place, with people streaming in from all over the country, and the city was filled with excitement and energy as people prepared for the feast.

However, this Passover there was a special sense of excitement and anticipation in the air, because the crowds were waiting for one particular person to arrive – Jesus. His fame (particularly following the raising of Lazarus) was such that as He enters Jerusalem, the crowds hail Him as a saviour, shouting 'Hosanna', a Hebrew word meaning, 'save us'.

King of the Jews

Jesus though, didn't just walk into the city, like most of the other pilgrims who had come to celebrate the Passover; on this occasion He chose to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey. In fact, Jesus' choice of a donkey was deliberate. Firstly, it was a recognised symbol of peace. In the Ancient Near East, kings and leaders would ride horses if they were going into battle, but donkeys if they came in peace.

Secondly, and more significantly, Jesus was fully aware of the verse in Zechariah (cf. 9:9-12) where the prophet declares:

"See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

The people, especially the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law, were also well aware of this prophecy, and they certainly wouldn't have missed the symbolism.

So, by riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, Jesus was making a powerful public statement. The people knew that this was how the Messiah, the rightful King of the Jews, would enter Jerusalem when He finally came. By arriving in this fashion, Jesus is in effect saying, "I am He and I am here. Your King has come to you."

And the crowd did indeed welcome Jesus as King of the Jews, but He had not come to Jerusalem seeking an earthly kingdom. Jesus was hailed as, 'Son of David' but he had a very different agenda from that of his illustrious ancestor. Jesus was a king without a kingdom, a leader without an army, yet He would become known as the King of Kings.

Jesus though, would be a king very different from the one the crowd were expecting or wanting. He was to be a king who would suffer for His people; not one who would lord it over them or oppress them. He would not lead them into battle against Rome, riding a stallion like a proud warrior; rather He had come to lead them back to God. But the way in which Jesus would accomplish this – by allowing Himself to be crucified - would shake the very foundations of the earth itself.

Indeed, not even His disciples in whom Jesus had confided and with whom He had shared so much, understood the significance of this final trip to Jerusalem. It would be something very special, yes - but it would also be something utterly dreadful too. His crucifixion would be both a glorious victory and a terrible tragedy - a miraculous paradox of God.

Cleansing The Temple

However, once inside Jerusalem, Jesus goes straight to the Temple, but is angered by what He finds there: money-changers and sellers of all kinds of goods, many of them exploiting and cheating the pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem to worship. Angered by the outrage, Jesus overturns their tables and drives them out of the temple courts, saying:

"It is written, ... 'My house will be called a house of prayer, but you are making it a den of robbers'."

Again, there's little doubt this incident is symbolic of Jesus' mission and it tells us much about His purpose in coming into the world in the first place. Not only is Jesus concerned for honesty and justice, and the sanctity of God's house, but He is also concerned for the state and condition of the human heart. Including your heart and mine.

By going straight to the Temple, which was the beating heart of the city, and cleansing it by driving out that which is unclean, that which defiles it, we have a living parable of how Jesus will cleanse and

transform our own lives by His sacrifice. But first we must be willing to open our lives and our hearts to Him - just as Jerusalem opened wide her gates and welcomed Jesus in.

A Living Temple

If we do receive Jesus; if we do open our hearts and lives to Him, then He will begin to cleanse us too, by dealing with that which defiles us; that which makes us unclean. In short, Jesus will deal with the sin in our lives; the sin that separates us from God. By embracing Jesus as our King, we can be made whole and righteous in God's sight.

If we look to Jesus for forgiveness and in faith cry out to Him "Hosanna" (meaning "save us") then Jesus will do just that - He will save us, by taking away our sin. And then we will become a Temple of God's Spirit. As St. Paul said:

"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?" (1 Cor 6:19)

In Christ we can be made new again - clean, righteous and acceptable to God. As Paul also says:

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ Jesus, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Cor 5:17).

Amen.