

Palm Sunday: The Joy at the Start of the Journey to the Cross

[Matthew 21: 1-11](#)



Last year I went on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. One of the many memorable experiences was arriving at the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem and making our way into the city. The narrow streets were full of pilgrims from all over the world, all singing praises to God in their own language. As we fell in step, we danced together, delighted to be in this gloriously colourful melting-pot of humanity, linking arms with total strangers, feeling deep closeness in our purpose for being at that place at that time.

This must have been something of the atmosphere as Jesus entered the city. People from far and wide would have congregated in Jerusalem to come to the temple to worship and gather together for the Passover Feast. The streets would have been alive with the sound of people singing, makeshift instruments being played and vendors selling their wares.

Jesus arrived in the city to great acclamation: people laying their cloaks on the ground and cutting branches to spread over the road were honours usually accorded to a king. Roman rulers would have come riding a fine stallion, the animal a symbol of conquering power. People would have been made to lay down their cloaks and strew branches along the route; woe betide them if they did not.

Yet here, Jesus is riding on the back of a young donkey, still meekly following its mother, its tiny hooves making a little “trip-trap” noise rather than the huge, clattering, steel-shod terror of a large horse. The donkey colt is a symbol of his humility and holiness. He did not come to conquer the world with overwhelming power and aggression. He did not impose himself upon the crowds in Jerusalem.



He has not forced the gathering crowd to offer their cloaks or branches to spread along the way. They praise God, they recognise him as the Son of David, who comes in the name of the Lord. They join with the angels’ joyful hosanna of praise ringing out in heaven.

The unfettered joy and energy of those crowds opening up a path for Jesus to travel on is powerfully infectious. Matthew’s gospel carefully links this scene with a prophecy from Zechariah. This wasn’t like a normal Passover celebration. This is a display of triumph and joy: the king which the oppressed Jews have been waiting for has arrived. Their time has come.

Some are puzzled by this wild, enthusiastic outburst: “Who is this?” they ask. They have not heard of this Jesus from the remote outpost of Nazareth in Galilee before. They are suspicious, and with good reason. This man, if he is who the people say he is, will blow the order of the Roman world from beneath them. That spells danger, both for the people who are so joyfully praising Jesus, and for Jesus himself.

This humble, yet triumphal entry to Jerusalem sets Jesus on his journey to the cross. Those same people who danced, sang and shouted his praise would turn their shouting to the aggressive, bloodthirsty baying of “Crucify him!” less than a week later. They would turn their allegiance to the release of a known criminal, and watch as the Son of God was taken to his brutal death.

But would we have been any different? The second verse of Philip Larkin’s poem “Take One Home For The Kiddies” shows something of humans’ capacity to treat life and death very lightly, of our constant desire for novelty and excitement.

*“Living toys are something novel,
But it soon wears off somehow.
Fetch the shoebox, fetch the shovel -
Mam, we're playing funerals now.”*

How constant is our faith? Do we follow what is novelty, filled with enthusiasm as crowds gather and worship is easy and uplifting in such a large company? You may be finding it hard to keep a routine of praise and prayer during this period of self-isolation when we cannot be together. Whether we are in each other’s company or alone, we need the strength of the Holy Spirit to keep us faithfully beside Jesus on the way of the cross.

The encouragement is that we are not alone: Jesus loves each of us so much that he did not follow a path to earthly glory and fame, but to death on the cross so that, through his death and resurrection, he could set us free to live new lives and worship him forever.

If you are able to do so, go out into your garden when you take your daily exercise today and gather some foliage. Picture yourself along with those crowds, and say the words of praise which the crowds sang as Jesus came into Jerusalem, and that the angels sing out in heaven:

*“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest!”*

In the words of the popular hymn “Sing hosanna”, ask God to give you strength and courage so that you too can sing: “keep me praising till the break of day.”

Rev’d Vicky Barrett

Sing [All glory laud and honour to thee redeemer king.](#)