

Reflection for Palm Sunday 2023

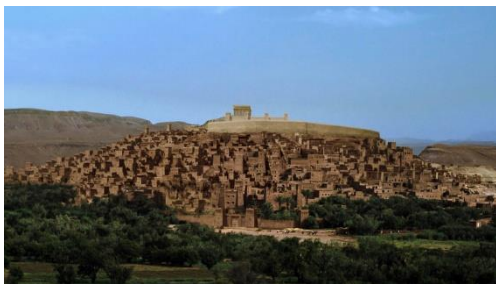
Psalms 118:1-2, 19-29 – Matthew 21:1-11

Almighty God, we give you thanks, for you call *us* to enter your gate, the gate of the Lord, through which the righteous may enter. Your love endures forever. Amen.

A week ago, King Charles was supposed to pay a visit to French president Emmanuel Macron in Paris. But the French being the French, with a resistance to change as notorious as their camembert, they were on strike. As a result, especially in Paris, trains were few and far between, and the streets were littered with thousands of tons of rubbish.

It wouldn't do for a King to arrive in a great city greeted by violent demonstrations, disrupted public transport – I hear King Charles wanted to come by train, which I think is highly commendable – and by hundreds of rats scurrying on the pavements and feasting on all the uncollected bin bags.

How do we imagine the visit of a King? I had this vision of the Eurostar station in Paris with a red carpet running all the way from the train to the pavement, a welcome committee made up of the president and his wife and all the dignitaries, all smiling faces and well-wishing people. It is special, it is exceptional, it is an attraction in itself.



And how did the Jewish people in First-century Palestine imagine the visit of the Messiah? *Messiah* - the word means literally 'anointed one', and in ancient Judaism, it indicated the coming king who would be David's true heir, through whom Yahweh would rescue Israel from pagan enemies. We know that people at the time were hoping for a decisive military defeat of Israel's enemies and rebuilding or cleansing the Temple.

So it was only natural that a very large crowd gathered on the way, spread their cloaks on the road, cut branches from the trees and also spread them on the path, much in the manner of a red carpet. And it is only natural that the crowds went ahead and behind Jesus, shouting 'Hosanna to the Son of David'. It made sense, it was only right for the heir of the great David.



And it made sense also because of something else altogether: a very important historic event.



What Jesus did was a reconstruction of a historic scene that had played out in Jerusalem about 150 years earlier. A long time, it may seem, but the events were so significant to Jewish people that they would have remembered.

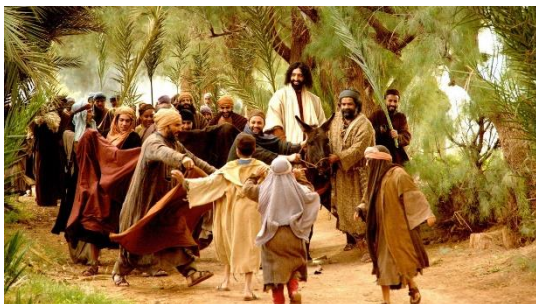
150 years earlier, the Temple of Jerusalem had been violated by a Syrian ruler, Antiochus Epiphanes. The man offered pig flesh to the Greek god Zeus on the altar. And he turned some of the Temple areas into a brothel! But then, a rescuing warrior and hero, Judas Maccabee, rode into town, and chased away the invaders, and the Temple was rededicated to the Lord. Then Judas started a royal dynasty that lasted a hundred years. The story is told in the second book of Maccabees in the Bible.

On that great day, the citizens of Jerusalem welcomed their rescuer by waving palm branches.

The successful revolt against Antiochus made Judas Maccabee a hero. Nicknamed 'The Hammer', he stamped the image of palm branches onto coins to commemorate the victory.



So that day, when Jesus rode into town, surely the people thought another mighty warrior was entering the city, but they did not notice he was *not* riding on a warhorse.



Jesus was riding a humble colt.

The crowd and the disciples failed to grasp what Jesus was about. And if we did not know any better, we would also get it wrong. The disciples always believed that Jesus was the true and rightly King of the Jews, on his way to the capital city to be hailed as such. So this was the moment

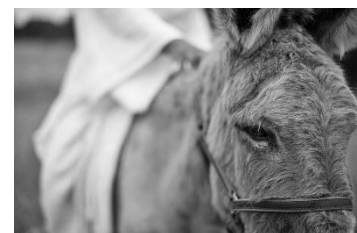
for his royal reception.

But the humble colt speaks of Jesus, the servant king, the Anointed one who washes the feet of his disciples. And we are told this was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Zechariah: Say to Daughter Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, lowly and riding on a donkey.'

Jesus was not leading a military or political revolt, as many thought, but a rescue mission from the powers of darkness. A rededication of God's people to God. A reconciliation of God with God's people.

Not a warhorse, but a donkey. Not an armour, but a simple robe. Not a helmet, but a crown of thorns. Not violence, but peace. Not death, but eternal life...

Are we ready for this?



Are we ready to welcome the servant king and become servants of others? Are we ready to go out of our way to honour him, spreading our best cloaks on the road before him, cutting branches from our favourite trees to wave at his coming and making this into a real festival? Are we ready for what Jesus expects of *us*, his followers?

St Paul said: 'Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith.' And all through Lent, we did just that, searching and probing. We reflected on our own failings but even more importantly on God's redeeming work. God is in the mess of our human lives with us. Like Jesus among the people on the road, God is with us now, and our lives and world are always in the scope of God's love and redemption.



As we start Holy Week, we have several more blessed days of reflection and of journeying to the cross with Jesus our Saviour: reflections on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday evenings, then remembering Jesus washing the feet of his disciples on Maundy Thursday, meditating on the ultimate sacrifice on Good Friday, and walking to Ely cathedral or praying on Holy Saturday.

All through this final week before Easter, we can walk with Jesus and ask him to rededicate us to him, as living temples for his love and his grace. And as Resurrection people, we have his Spirit to guide us, inspire us, and reshape us this Easter.

So how about we put ourselves entirely in the hands of God? Spread our cloaks on the road, and invite him in, singing Hosanna? How about we invite the Spirit of God to breathe new life in us?

In preparation for Holy Week, I'd like to finish with a song. The song *Holy Spirit, Living Breath of God*. In the power of God our Father, with the help of the Spirit, let us walk with confidence with Jesus Christ our Saviour, all the way to the cross.

Holy Spirit, living breath of God,
Breathe new life into my willing soul.
Let the presence of the risen Lord,
Come renew my heart and make me whole.
Cause Your Word to come alive in me;
Give me faith for what I cannot see,
Give me passion for Your purity;
Holy Spirit, breathe new life in me.

Holy Spirit, come abide within,
May Your joy be seen in all I do.
Love enough to cover every sin,
In each thought and deed and attitude.

Kindness to the greatest and the least,
Gentleness that sows the path of peace.
Turn my strivings into works of grace;
Breath of God show Christ in all I do.

Holy Spirit, from creation's birth,
Giving life to all that God has made,
Show Your power once again on earth,
Cause Your church to hunger for your ways.
Let the fragrance of our prayers arise;
Lead us on the road of sacrifice,
That in unity the face of Christ
May be clear for all the world to see.