

Palm Sunday is the final Sunday of Lent and marks the beginning of Holy Week and the triumphal arrival of Jesus into Jerusalem – riding a donkey surrounded by people praising him and waving palm branches – hence the name given to today.

Celebrating this day started in the Jerusalem church in the 3rd century where a procession would go around the holy places within the city. In the 6th and 7th centuries the blessing of palms were added to the traditions and today we will each receive a cross knotted from a single palm frond to commemorate today's significance.

Up to this point, throughout the rest of Jesus' ministry he would repeatedly tell those around him who had seen his miracles and healings to keep quiet, to keep it to themselves. But his renown was increasing and great crowds were now gathering wherever he went - to hear this now well-known prophet speak and hopefully to see him perform miracles, his celebrity had grown.

On this day - by his own actions - he started to openly declare himself as the Messiah. Jesus knew exactly what would be ahead of him in Jerusalem, he would be heading for his death.

On his way to Jerusalem, Luke recounts that he stopped, overlooking the city and he wept over it and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes." He knew what was ahead. Those of us lucky enough to have travelled to Israel in 2022 will recall the little teardrop shaped Church of Dominus Flevit which has been built on the spot where Jesus wept over Jerusalem and the wonderful view from inside looking at the altar and over the Mount of Olives to the Golden Dome.

Jesus intentionally instructed his disciples to find him a colt, the foal of a donkey so that he could affirm that he was indeed the Messiah they had been waiting for by fulfilling the 500 year old prophecy stated in the book of Zechariah:

Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!
Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you,
righteous and victorious,
lowly and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

And we heard in our Gospel reading - he asked them to untie the colt – the same phrase can be applied to ourselves – we should untie ourselves so that we can be free to celebrate Jesus as our Saviour.

The use of the donkey instead of a horse was highly symbolic - in Eastern tradition the donkey is an animal of peace so would signify the humble arrival of someone in peace as opposed to a king or warrior arriving on a magnificent horse of war. Donkeys are known for endurance, perseverance and strength - qualities that we too should adopt remembering that Jesus endured suffering and shame on the cross knowing that through his death all of mankind would be saved.

Jesus chose this specific time to reveal himself as the Messiah, when all those around Israel would be flocking to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover festival. There would be crowds of people to witness his arrival, not as a warring king, but as a gentle and peaceable King riding on a donkey's colt. He was arriving as the King of Peace.

The crowds spread their cloaks and laid palm branches in the road in front of him. This was a customary practice at the time shown to people of great respect. And palm branches – I found out - were one of 4 species decreed in the book of Leviticus to be used specifically for rejoicing. In other cultures they are used as a symbol of peace and victory. They were often depicted on coins and important buildings. And it's mentioned in 1 Kings that Solomon had palm trees carved into the walls and doors of the temple.

In later times the martyr's palm was used as a symbol of Christian martyrs and their spiritual victory over death.

But back to Jesus entering Jerusalem.

The people were expecting the Messiah to be a revolutionary leader, a king – who would topple the rule of Rome. But they misunderstood that he didn't come to defeat the Romans and free them from Roman occupation – he didn't come to free them from political oppression but he came to defeat the enemies of sin, death and the devil that had imprisoned every man and woman since Adam and Eve.

The crowd recognised the importance of what they were seeing – in fact they were chanting part of Psalm 118 - Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD - but they misunderstood its purpose. As a result, these same people praising him and shouting Hosanna would sadly just 5 days later be encouraged by the Pharisees to demand that Pilate "crucify him"! Ironically claiming that they had 'no king but Caesar'.

Palm Sunday reminds us that the reign of Jesus is greater than any reign a man could ever conceive. God's ultimate plan was to send his one and only son to fight the final battle over death. This is the significance of Palm Sunday. Because of Jesus' sacrifice – we are set free of death.

We recall John chapter 3 ¹⁶For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Belonging to Jesus means having eternal peace with God. While we will inevitably do things that will grieve Him, He will never abandon us. We should humbly accept that as humans we all have short-comings but we should surrender ourselves to humbly and peacefully accept Jesus into our lives as our Saviour and our King.

Amen

Carol Elsasser, 24/3/24