

Sermon on Luke 19: 28 – 40
Lavenham and Preston St Mary 100422

“May all I say and think be acceptable to thee, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.”

Today is Palm Sunday. The start of Holy Week, when we remember Christ’s suffering – as he traces his final steps to the glorious role that had always been his destiny.

Holy Week has been part of the Church’s pattern of celebration since very early times.

Across the world, whether Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran or Anglican, United States, India - Ukraine or Russia in more normal times - you will find Palm Sunday being celebrated.

With just one proviso - Western and Eastern churches usually celebrate the start of Holy Week on separate occasions - it is not until April 17th for the Eastern Church this year.

2025 will be the next year that the whole of Christ's church will share the same date for Palm Sunday.

All to do with the differing calculations that determine the date of Easter Day!

The whole significance of Palm Sunday rests upon two prophecies in Zechariah. Firstly, [14:4]:

“On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives.”

as reflected in the second verse of our gospel reading. And, perhaps, I like to imagine, when Jesus would recall how he wept for Jerusalem:

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.” [Luke 13:34]

From the Mount, Jesus then instructs two of his disciples to fetch him a colt from the village ahead.

The instruction to them to say "The Lord needs it" would seem to be a coded message to the owner of that colt, a constituent part of a carefully pre-planned symbolic entry into Jerusalem by Jesus and his disciples.

So that we can move on to Zechariah's second prophecy [9:9ff]:

“Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.....and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.”

Luke also records part of Psalm 118, which we read today; that Psalm is the song – of a conqueror:

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.”

Luke has the people spreading their cloaks; other gospels have them spread palm leaves or rushes.

If one is in a colder climate with no palms to hand – Ukraine and Russia, for example – then pussy willow and box twigs are strewn instead.

If in India, marigolds are strewn.

All are impulsive and instinctive reactions by the crowd, recollecting their own traditions, to grace the path of a conqueror.

For example, you can find in the second book of Kings (9:13) a parallel example when Jehu, the son of Jehoshaphat, is anointed king of Israel, and his followers throw down their cloaks to honour his path.

Solomon had palm branches carved into the doors and walls of his temple (that's in the first book of Kings - 6:29).

And, likewise, it was a tradition that a king would ride a horse to war, and a donkey if returning in peace.

So, if the crowd had been expecting a stallion and the start of a rebellion against Rome, they were disappointed.

Jesus is declaring by his entry that he comes in peace, riding on the colt of an ass – the foal of a donkey.

The reference to Zechariah's prophecy will be obvious to those well-versed in scripture.

John devotes virtually a third of his 21 chapters to the space between Palm Sunday and Good Friday.

Why should the entry of Jesus, with his smallish band of followers, provoke such interest, such uproar, if this is his first visit to Jerusalem?

[Witness that verse 40 in Luke: “Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop””]

Well, for a start, it certainly isn't his first visit – John records others.

Verse 25 of Psalm 118 reads: "Save us, we beseech thee, O Lord": for which the original Hebrew is “Hosanna”.

And Verse 26 of that Psalm reads: “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”

Matthew, Mark and Luke record the crowd as saying precisely the same thing. Which is another way of saying “Blessed is the Messiah – the anointed One of God”.

There will be many who have heard of Jesus, his teaching and his miracles. They may have seen and heard him on his previous visits.

There will be many in the crowd who know their scripture well enough to be able to recognise the reference to Zechariah.

So this is what that great prophet meant.

Their Messiah was not to be a man of power and aggression, but a man of truth and humility. Exactly like this man Jesus. They would not have to look far for a description of such a Messiah – Jesus himself quoted Isaiah's description of a Servant of The Lord God. [Isaiah 50, 4 – 9a.]

“The Lord GOD helps me.”

“I gave my back to those who struck me.”

“I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.”

“It is the Lord GOD who helps me.”

All that is to come in the week ahead – commemorated by us in Holy Week. But today, we remember that Christ enters Jerusalem on a donkey, **quite deliberately** to fulfil prophecy.

Does that idea seem somehow wrong to you?

It shouldn't, because what it demonstrates is that Jesus recognised how the Scriptures foretold his coming, and realised the necessity to enact some of the practical details, so that the people of Israel should be convinced of His anointment by God.

And, since those same scriptures told of his eventual execution, one can only marvel at His dedication – His complete obedience – to His Father's wishes.

This coming week, remember Gethsemane, where Jesus sweated blood, so great was his anticipation of the pain that he was going to have to go through, all to prove His Father's word.

Amen.

I've put some images for you to look at over your coffee after the service – to reflect on the events we remember today. Two are just beautiful, the other two display my present sorrow.

G K Chesterton has the donkey speak:

“When fishes flew and forests walk'd
And figs grew upon thorn,
Some moment when the moon was blood
Then surely I was born.

With monstrous head and sickening cry
And ears like errant wings,
The devil's walking parody
Of all four-footed things.

The tatter'd outlaw of the earth
Of ancient crooked will;
Starve, scourge, deride me, I am dumb,
I keep my secret still.

Fools! For I also had my hour,
One far, fierce hour and sweet;
There was a shout about my ears,
And palms before my feet.