

Christ Church and the Bridgwater Drive Church, Palm Sunday 2021

Palms with verses from My song is love unknown (R&S 207)

Welcome to this Palm Sunday service, which for the second year, will be online rather than in church. But undaunted we will journey to Jerusalem to celebrate Christ's triumphant entry marking the start of Holy Week and the events leading up to his death and resurrection. "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!"

Call to Worship

Rejoice greatly, O people of Zion!

Shout in triumph, O people of Jerusalem!

Look, your king is coming to you.

He is righteous and victorious,

yet he is humble, riding on a donkey - even on a donkey's colt.

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

You are our God, and we will praise You!

O give thanks to the Lord, for He is good.

His faithful love endures forever!

Hymn Ride on, ride on in majesty (R&S 209) recorded by Thora

1 Ride on, ride on in majesty!
Hark! all the tribes hosanna cry;
O Savior meek, pursue your road
With palms and scattered garments strowed.

3 Ride on, ride on in majesty!
Your last and fiercest strife is nigh;
The Father on his sapphire throne
Expects his own anointed Son.

2 Ride on, ride on in majesty!
In lowly pomp ride on to die:
O Christ, your triumphs now begin
O'er captive death and conquered sin.

4 Ride on, ride on in majesty!
In lowly pomp ride on to die;
Bow your meek head to mortal pain,
Then take, O God, your pow'r and reign.

Opening Prayers

On this Palm Sunday, O God, we remember how quickly we change.

How fickle we are, how we pledge our devotion one moment and turn our backs the next.

We go from shouting "Hosanna! Save Us!" to "Crucify Him."

We declare that we love our neighbours and then we turn our backs on the homeless and hungry in our communities.

We speak up for change and justice in one breath, and then continue unjust practices in daily lives by what we consume and the needs we ignore.

Forgive us, O God, for we are half-hearted believers.

Forgive us, O God, for we are partial justice warriors.

Forgive us, O God, for we tire easily and we forget, and we grow weary.

Forgive us, restore us, and renew us for the journey of faith, so that we might become whole people who live wholly into Your vision of new life. In the name of Christ, who lived into the fullness of humanity, and whom we follow. **Amen.**

From the URC Prayer Handbook, by Rachel Poolman

Gentle Christ, you set your face to Jerusalem

the place of trial, of torture and death –

surrounded by noise, by expectation and hope;

love unknown, vulnerability unrecognised.

Gentle Christ, we will walk with you, we will weep with you, we will watch with you;

our eyes on you, our hearts with you, our lives for you;

in humility, in awe, in peace. Amen

The Lord's Prayer

Reading: Mark 11:1-11

So, one year on, we are still in lockdown and just on Tuesday we had the National Day of Reflection and prayer for the more than 126,000 people who have died as a result of the pandemic. Again, as last year, it doesn't feel quite right to me to have too much joyous palm waving and shouts of hallelujahs – and it would be a bit tricky to wave large palms at home anyway! But unlike last year, when we were at the very start of the pandemic and the start of the first lockdown, very much afraid and with no idea what the future held, now we are older and wiser. We have got used to being at home. We have got slightly more polished at doing services online, we have a well-oiled machine of volunteers who deliver the weekly News and Chat and printed services. And, nearly all of the priority groups have now been vaccinated, at least with the first dose. I'm sure there will still be setbacks, but there is light at the end of the tunnel in a way that there wasn't a year ago and so we can be a bit more cheerful. And of course, our re-enactment, for that is what it is, of the Passion story from Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, to his overturning of tables in the temple, the Last Supper and washing of feet, his arrest, torture and death; our remembering is not dependent on what is happening now, or the national mood, or our own personal mood, we do it every year because these are the stories on which our faith is built. In the way that Jesus celebrated the Passover with his disciples – the Last Supper was a *seder* meal with unleavened bread, bitter herbs and wine – we too remember through Bible stories and symbolic acts the last days of Jesus life, starting with that unexpected entry into Jerusalem on a humble donkey, rather than as a mighty warrior on a fine horse. That said, if our telling of these stories is just historic remembering, or nostalgia for Palm Sundays and Easters from the 'good old days' and doesn't relate to what is going on around us, it becomes worthless repetition.

A key point about Jesus' 'triumphal' entry into Jerusalem is about perception, about managing the expectations of the crowds and the disciples. They were expecting the Messiah. These verses from Mark 11 depict Jesus as a long-awaited king. For Mark, the very title "Christ" denotes royalty. They were expecting a king of David's line, entering David's royal city. It was King David who made Jerusalem the capital of his kingdom, and it was David's son, King Solomon, who built the first temple in Jerusalem. Books of the Old Testament consistently remember Jerusalem as the "city of David," while certain psalms explicitly connect Jerusalem, or Zion, with being God's, so it is not hard for the Jews to envision a royal Messiah who would rule from Jerusalem. Bearing all of this in mind, we can imagine how some characters in this week's story might experience Jesus' actions as a "triumphal" entry, bringing him one step closer to establishing his throne in the ancient city of kings. The star-struck disciples already know that Jesus is the Messiah – Peter announced it in Mark chapter 8 and Jesus "sternly ordered them not to tell anyone." They have been anticipating a future of greatness and glory alongside their leader ever since. And Jesus has performed so many miracles and spoken so much about the coming kingdom of God, that the crowds also now believe he is the Messiah.

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Jesus manages their expectations well. While he does not enter the city triumphantly on a grand horse, flanked by soldiers or supporters with weapons, he fulfils a prophecy from Zechariah that all the people would have recognised - "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! 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". Mark does not quote Zechariah directly as Matthew does, but all the people present would have known what the symbolism of a colt meant. Jesus enacts this prophecy presumably because of its counter-cultural image of a victorious king, humble on a colt rather than haughty on a warhorse. The importance of the allusion is signalled by the detailed account of Jesus instructing two of his disciples to find the colt and procure it for him – a whole four verses of detail, from a writer who is usually so sparing with his words. Mark does not want us to miss how deliberate are Jesus' actions and instructions. The tragic irony, of course, is that Jesus is headed to a shameful execution—and he knows it. From the moment that he divulged his messianic identity to his disciples, he has prophesied this fate even though the disciples are reluctant to hear it.

And what of all this now in 2021? We too have to manage our expectations – when might we be able to go back to church? When will we be able to go into a shop without a mask, or get closer than six feet with our friends and relations? Will we be able to take a foreign holiday this year? All these could be described as first-world problems compared to those who ask when will we have enough money to buy food instead of going to a food bank, when will I have a job again, when can I hold the hand of my spouse with dementia in the care-home who has forgotten who I am? When will the bombs stop raining down on us? When might our country get some of the vaccines the rich countries are hoarding?

Our perceptions of what the future months hold have been shaped by what the past year has shown us. Has it been a time of learning new skills, of having more time with the family we live with, with pets, an appreciation of nature, of ironically keeping in touch more with people we know who don't live close, of community spirit and friendliness? Or, has it been a time of severe illness, of death, of not being able to attend that funeral, of depression or anxiety, of wondering if your neighbours are breaking the rules, of fearing younger people are getting their job before you are? Are you now looking forward to gradually being able to go out and socialise again, to not going back to how things were before, but taking all the good things you've learned and using them to make the world a better place? Or are you now despairing of the government and its mistakes, fearful that the restrictions will ever be lifted, and if they are, are you now so used to staying at home alone that you're scared to go out? Perceptions. Expectations. Hopes and dreams.

The crowds in Jerusalem were expecting a king who would overthrow the Roman Empire, what they got, what they *thought* they got was a man tortured and executed as a political prisoner. Killed in the most gruesome method that was available. Until... but the denouement comes next Sunday. We already know the happy outcome, they didn't. So for now, like the crowds in Jerusalem, we look to Holy Week and remember Christ's Passion.

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Hymn Heaven shall not wait <https://youtu.be/FHMt3YJHbZE>

Heaven shall not wait for the poor to lose their patience,
the scorned to smile, the despised to find a friend:
Jesus is Lord: he has championed the unwanted;
in him injustice confronts its timely end.

Heaven shall not wait for the rich to share their fortunes,
the proud to fall, the elite to tend the least:
Jesus is Lord; he has shown the master's privilege –
to kneel and wash servants' feet before they feast.

Heaven shall not wait for the dawn of great ideas,
thoughts of compassion divorced from cries of pain:
Jesus is Lord; he has married word and action;
his cross and company make his purpose plain.

Heaven shall not wait for triumphant Hallelujahs,
when earth has passed and we reach another shore:
Jesus is Lord in our present imperfection;
his power and love are for now and then for evermore.

Virtual Palm Procession while we listen to Crucified Man by Graham Kendrick

<https://youtu.be/1k0ak1xn5uM> Words to follow on the last page

If you have a Palm Cross from last year, please place it where you can see it

Prayers

Gracious and loving God, In the journey of life, you are our guide and our companion.
From our beginning to our end, you are there.
You run this race alongside us, at times encouraging us, at times comforting us, at times tending to our wounds, at times carrying us when we don't think we can take another step.
For six weeks we have been on a Lenten journey,
and you have been right here with us - in our discipline and devotion,
in our weakness and failure, in our fear, and in our hope.
As we spend this final week with Jesus in Jerusalem,
we are amazed once again by his gentle spirit and fierce determination.
As he confronts those who challenge him,
he confronts our own stubbornness and defiant wills.
As he cares even for those who hate him,
we are challenged to love as he loves.
As he bears witness to the emergence of your kingdom,
our eyes are opened to your presence all around us.
As he moves with resolve toward his dark destiny,
we find ourselves struggling to understand why it has to be this way.
God, the journey is not just about the destination;
it is about each step along the way.
The journey itself is a blessing, with all of its joys and sorrows.
As we run this race you are shaping us into new people.
As we move with you, we are continually born anew.
Help us to be attentive to each step, in the darkness and in the light.
Help us to fully experience all that we encounter,
the good and the bad, for in it all we discover you.

O Christ, you entered the city as a simple poor man
yet still you caused uproar, and questions;

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you drew the expectations of a hungry crowd, and brought buried conflicts to the light.
May we, who like Pilate are sometimes swayed by the crowd's approval,
and who often avoid conflict for fear of its cost to us,
hold fast to the gospel of peace and justice
and follow faithfully in your way of compassion and solidarity
with those who are poor and excluded, wherever it may lead us. Amen

Hymn All glory, laud, and honour (R&S 208) recorded by Thora

All glory, laud, and honour
To thee, Redeemer, King
To whom the lips of children
Made sweet hosannas ring!
Thou art the King of Israel
Thou David's royal Son
Who in the Lord's name comest
The King and Blessed One

The company of angels
Are praising Thee on high
And mortal men and all things
Created make reply
The people of the Hebrews
With palms before Thee went
Our praise and love and anthems
Before Thee we present

To Thee, before Thy passion
They sang their hymns of praise
To Thee, now high exalted
Our melody we raise
Thou didst accept their praises
Accept the love we bring
Who in all good delightest
Thou good and gracious King

All glory, laud, and honour
To thee, Redeemer, King
To whom the lips of children
Made sweet hosannas ring!

Blessing:

And now we lay down our palm branches.
And with them we lay down our belief that there is another way for you to be God.
As the last echo of the final alleluia fades,
so does our hope that this journey can end in any other way.
The week stretches ahead glory-less and pain-full
Whether we walk with much faith or little, we look towards the cross,
knowing it is both the most human and most divine of all journeys
So, travel the road with courage,
with love, and with the uneasy peace that is the gift of faith into this holiest of weeks. Amen

For now, let us pretend, like the first century Jews and disciples, that we do not know what this week holds for Jesus and go out with shouts of joy and loud hosannas!

Hymn You shall go out with joy <https://youtu.be/unWnWSgoSt0>

Crucified Man by Graham Kendrick

I have placed all my hope in a crucified man
In the wounds in his side, his feet and his hands
I have traded my pride for a share in his shame
And the glory that one-day will burst from his pain

I've abandoned my trust in the wise and the proud
For this fragile, mysterious weakness of God
And I dare to believe in his scandalous claim
That his blood cleanses sin for who ever
Will call on his name
Live or die here I stand
I've placed my hope in a crucified man

I believe as they beat on his beautiful face
He turned a torturer's chair to an altar of grace
Where the worst we can do met the best that God does
Where unspeakable hate met the gaze
Of unstoppable love
At the crux of it all there he hangs
I've placed my hope in a crucified...

Man of sorrows man of grief
Will he stay beyond belief?

When the purest and best took the force of our curse
Death's victory armada juddered into reverse...
And either we bow or we stumble and fall
For the wisdom of a suffering God
Has made fools of us all
I gladly admit that I am
But I've placed my hope in a crucified ...

Man of sorrows man of grief
Will he stay beyond belief?

I have buried my life in the cold earth with him
Like a seed in the winter, I wait for the spring
From that garden of tombs Eden rises again
And Paradise blooms from his body
And never will end
He'll finish all he began
Creation hopes in a crucified man

When I stand at the judgement
I have no other plan
I've placed my hope in a crucified man

Like the thief nailed beside him
I have no other plan
I've placed my hope in a crucified man