

Call to Worship

Give thanks to the LORD, who alone is good;
whose steadfast love is everlasting!
This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.
Gracious and eternal God,
Let the silent mystery of your Spirit
surround, sustain and excite us.
Transform our gathering to your glory,
and perfect our worship for your praise.

Hymn A donkey brought you into sight Tune (R&S 209 Ride on, ride on in majesty)

A donkey brought you into sight,
confronting wrong, exalting right;
devoid of legions, pomp or pow'r,
you made an ass of Roman might.

Into Jerusalem you came,
to root out wrong, exalt God's name;
to overthrow the temple's ways,
to challenge priests, provoke and shame.

Then daily, in the broad daylight,
debating wrong, exalting right,

you bettered every trick and trap,
provoking them to turn and fight.

Exposed by what you'd say and do,
they plotted wrong, exalting you
to die upon a cross of shame,
their heartless failure showing through.

But priestly pow'r and Roman might,
combined in wrong, must lose this fight,
for God's own kingdom, come in Christ,
will outdo death, raise up the right.

John Campbell © Kevin Mayhew Ltd

Children's Time – Palms

Gifts + Lent coin collection

Holy God, you have fed us all
out of your own generous and gracious hands.
From them, we have received welcome,
nourishment, hope, and consolation.
May these things grow in us,
alongside these gifts of money and food, and the gift of faith,
so that we may plant their seeds in the world around us.
As we enter Holy week and journey towards Jerusalem and the Cross,
guide us to remember our place in your great and on-going story
of resurrection, redemption, and restoration
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Processional Hymn All glory, laud and honour R&S 208 **as the children leave for Sunday Club**

Prayers - URC Prayer Handbook p24

On this 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.**

Hymn My Song is Love Unknown R&S 207 omit v 5&6

Bible readings: **Psalm 31:9-16**
 Matthew 21:1-11

Palm Sunday is a paradox, a mixture of dark and light. We celebrate Jesus's triumphant and joyful entry into Jerusalem, the crowds spreading cloaks and branches on the road for Jesus to ride over, shouting hosanna, 'blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord', hosanna in the highest – the words we often say as we celebrate the Lord's supper. And yet even in Matthew's gospel, which is perhaps the most cheerful of the Palm Sunday readings, within this joyous scene we are told the 'whole city was in turmoil' asking who is this? A place in turmoil is not usually a joyful place. Turmoil is often a word used when reporting natural disasters, or the aftermath of riots. Both of which our world has seen recently, in the devastating tornado in Mississippi and the riots in France. And today is also known and celebrated as Passion Sunday, the start of Holy Week. A much more sombre and serious affair. Today really has a spit personality. While our call to worship was based on the psalm set for today 'give thanks to the Lord for he is good, his steadfast love endures forever', the psalm we heard before the Gospel reading is set for Passion Sunday and is completely different – 'be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress'. It seems to me that these might be words that Jesus could be saying or thinking as he approaches his last days; just as King David said them in the psalm, or the prophets have said them or we might say or think them when we go through hard times.

As a country we also seem to be balancing light and dark, good things and bad: Last year we had the joy of the Queen's Jubilee, followed by the sadness of her death and funeral. This year we will have the joy of the Coronation (even if you are not much of a royalist it gives an extra day off and the possibility of street parties and days out) against a background of the cost-of-living crisis, inflation, the issue of what to do about and how to treat asylum seekers and refugees, the ever growing reliance on food banks, and strange weather due to climate change. And while it now feels like Covid and the lockdowns are a dim memory, there is still Covid around, and we are still living with the consequences of the pandemic with less people coming back to regular Sunday worship, less volunteers, and people who's health has deteriorated during those years, or who are simply more reluctant or too nervous to go out as much as they used to. In our own congregation, while we have the joy of the birth of a baby, we've recently had two funerals. Palm Sunday and Passion

Sunday, the light and dark sides of the same coin. Much like Easter itself – the sadness and despair of Good Friday, followed by the joy of Easter morning, with the waiting of Easter Saturday in between.

We can think of Palm Sunday as the calm before the storm, a time for a party before the awfulness of Holy Week begins, or we can view it as a more serious step on the beginning of the journey to the cross. When I was in my final year placement in London, I remember saying to my supervisor that I was planning to do something a bit darker and more depressing than usual for Palm Sunday, and he said, but Palm Sunday is dark and sinister – Jesus comes in on a donkey, like a clown. The court jesters, and clowns are always a bit sinister. And he recommended I watch a Charlie Chaplin film called the *Pilgrim* in which Charlie is an escaped convict who disguises himself as a priest and just happens to turn up at a town where everyone is waiting for the new priest to arrive (the real priest is unavoidably delayed) and so Charlie, the criminal, is accepted as the priest. And he gets away with it, and even goes to board with a widow and her daughter, and to cut a long story short he changes his life around and becomes a better person, so much so that he recovers something stolen from the family by another criminal and returns it to them. However, eventually they see a wanted poster and the sheriff says he must take him back to jail, but on the way, he lets Charlie go. He gives him his freedom and the subtitle for this silent film is 'a new life, peace at last'. Metaphors abound – Jesus turns up in Jerusalem where people are waiting for a Messiah, but Jesus is not the Messiah they are looking for. He does not come riding into Jerusalem on a fine horse with a conquering army, but on donkey – not even a donkey, but a colt the foal of a donkey. Jesus is not masquerading when he enters Jerusalem, he's not in disguise, he has been truthful from the start about what is going to happen to him, but the people, his own disciples included, mistake him for what he is not – an all-conquering king riding in triumph to take down the Roman empire. Jesus brings a new beginning, a new and different way of doing things. He changes lives and turns everything upside down. One of the prayers I read in preparation for today said we can easily get people to find branches to lay down. We can quite easily make palms out of newspaper and feel good about recycling something we'd otherwise throw away. It is easy to order and give out Palm crosses, but what if Jesus actually arrived here today in Christ Church, inviting us to really lay down something important to us? Would we find that easy? To help us reflect on that, we're going to have a visual Palm parade – no waving of branches or palm crosses, no shouting hallelujahs, not even any nice Easter music, but some pictures of turmoil, leading to a rainy and windswept path, a path with rubbish, and problems, just like our lives – images of storms which are becoming more frequent as we

destroy our planet - roads strewn with branches and detritus from trees which made me think of Palm Sunday when the road was covered with branches and leaves, and even people's clothes to make a carpet for Jesus to ride in on. **Slide show.**

We often assume Jerusalem is a hot and dusty place, but Jerusalem has winters too. Sometimes it even snows and in recent years there has been rain and severe flooding. Our images of Jesus entering Jerusalem are always sunlit, always cheerful (**12,13**) but it could have been the weather was not good. Jesus could have ridden into Jerusalem in the rain, soaked, cold and bedraggled, looking really quite pathetic on his soggy donkey, his feet dragging on the ground. (**14**) Jesus, like us has ups and downs; good times and bad. No sooner had he been baptized and blessed and pronounced beloved, no sooner had he come up out of the Jordan's murky waters with divine favour dripping off him did the very Spirit of God send him into the barren desert to be tempted for 40 long days. And so, it continues for the rest of his life: His first sermon, then the mob that tries to run him off a cliff. The glory of his mountaintop transfiguration, then the down-to-earth reality of human brokenness. His triumphal entry into Jerusalem, then the agony of the cross. Jesus had a human life like ours with peaks and valleys, feast and famine, heartland and wilderness. Yet as much as we might think our hard times are just something to be survived, Jesus' experience suggests that hard times and turmoil are holy ground, that wilderness is where we are found and formed. We have been to the wilderness of Lent and now we step into the agony of Holy week – the brokenness before the resurrection; the sadness of death before the unbounded joy of new life.

Hymn Heaven shall not wait John L. Bell & Graham Maule
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.

Prayers of intercession

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.

Prayers for current situations and concerns... silence

O Christ, you entered the city as a simple poor man
yet still you caused uproar, and questions;
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 Alone you once went forth, O Lord R&S 212

Alone you once went forth, O Lord,
in sacrifice to die;
does not your sorrow touch the hearts
of people passing by?

This was earth's darkest hour, but you
did light and life restore;
then let us give all praise to you
who live for evermore.

Our sins, not yours, you bore then, Lord:
make us your sorrow feel,
till through our pity and our shame
love answers love's appeal.

Grant us with you to suffer, Lord,
that, as we share this hour,
your cross may bring us to your joy
and resurrection power

Peter Abelard

Blessing

Christ Church, 2 April 2023 Palm Sunday - Palm Crosses given out on entry

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

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