



MARCH 28, 2021

# PREPARE THE WAY

PALM SUNDAY

# *PREPARE THE WAY*

MARK 11:1-11

Today, we join Jesus on the last stretch of his journey to Jerusalem and the Cross. This entry into the city is culmination of Jesus' ministry on earth; the beginning of the end, and a new beginning for all of us. It's the good news about to break through into history, and that is an exciting event.

I have to confess, though, that I find the triumphal entry aspect of Palm Sunday a bit confusing. A quick glance and it looks simple enough: Jesus and his followers leave his friend's house in Bethany, and enter into Jerusalem, accompanied by shouts and celebration; Jesus looks around for a bit, and then they all leave, back to Bethany for the night. But as is so often the case when Jesus is involved, there is a lot happening under the surface of this triumphal entry.

From our perspective, post-Good Friday, post-Easter, two thousand years later, the celebratory mood of the crowd seems odd. They threw their cloaks down – which is a very humble and reverential act, something a crowd might do for a king or a returning hero – and they waved palm branches, a symbol of Jewish nationhood and of triumphant victory. The crowds certainly hadn't gathered intentionally to see Jesus; it was Passover week, and thousands of visitors from across Israel were all heading to Jerusalem and the Temple for this very holy and special festival. But they seemed to immediately recognise Jesus as someone important, his arrival on donkey-back as something worth celebrating. Perhaps they remembered their Scriptures:

“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.”

The crowd saw Jesus astride a donkey colt and responded spontaneously, full of hope, because their king was coming to save them. Because that's what hosanna means – not hurray or three-cheers – but save us, help us. The crowd had been living under foreign Roman rule for quite some time. And Rome ruled by military power and political maneuvering. The crowd wanted freedom, rescue from oppression, and they saw Jesus, looking like the promised messiah, their rescuer-king, and thought – here is our freedom. He'll lead us



into battle, into a revolution, and we'll be liberated, a free Jewish nation, once more.

Maybe it makes sense that this same crowd will be shouting "crucify him" in a few days' time; because although they see good news in Jesus, it's the wrong good news. Jesus is not going to be the kind of messiah they're hoping for, and that's clearly demonstrated by what Jesus does upon triumphantly entering the city: he goes to the Temple, takes a look around, and walks away. Jesus has a different battleground in mind.

For Jesus, this day is less about celebration of a triumphant victory and more about preparing for what is to come.

The people heading to Jerusalem for Passover respond to Jesus like a king, like a conquering hero, throwing their cloaks and palm branches on the road ahead of him, waving their branches and shouting as he comes.

In the midst of all that misguided celebration and acclaim, I wonder if Jesus felt rather poignant and a little sad, because he understood their actions differently than they did. Jesus knew he was coming as a sacrifice, lovingly and freely given, to truly liberate and save them all. They were preparing the way for Jesus to enter victoriously in Jerusalem, but not with their palms and their shouts and their cloaks on the road. That crowd was preparing Jesus' way to the Cross.

Maybe we belong with that cloak-throwing, palm-waving crowd, too, that crowd that shouted "save us" on Sunday and "crucify him" on Friday; because we have all prepared Jesus' way to the Cross.

There are many ways of thinking and speaking about what happens to Jesus and through Jesus on the Cross. It is easier and more palatable to focus on what happens after the Cross, the effect it has on our lives: God's grace at work within us, mending and restoring us; Christ's presence and love, infusing us; the Spirit to guide and sustain us; hearts, minds and bodies turned toward God and working to bring that new, abundant, kingdom-life into the world around us. But underpinning all the ideas about what happens on the Cross, behind all the good things that flow into our lives after the Cross, under all that is the certainty that somehow Jesus assumes all the sin that ever was and ever will be on our behalf, and dies to make us free of it.

That's a lot of sin. Remember that sin is so much more than breaking some rules or doing something cruel or unkind. Imagining that sin is limited to telling a lie, now and again, or losing your temper, or saying a bad word...we can apologise and try not to do it again, but that's like tearing the top off a weed and thinking it's gone, while leaving the roots in the soil. Jesus is going for the roots, to tear sin out of us and creation for good. All the wars and terrorist attacks in human history, the holocaust and too many genocides; an island of plastic garbage in the ocean the size of Texas; people going hungry when we throw out a third of our food supply; the suffering of illness and disease, and the pain of mental unwellness; racial and gender-driven violence and discrimination; unjust imprisonment; social assistance that frustrates and falls short as often as it helps, and yes, the petty ugly sinful actions of lying, stealing, breaking trust, snapping at our loved ones...it's all an out-growth of sin, of turning away from God, orienting our lives and our societies around anything that is not God.

How does the old familiar prayer of confessing go? In our choices, our actions, what we have done and left undone, what we have said and failed to say... together, we have made necessary some extraordinary, saving action by God; together, we prepare the way for Jesus to the Cross. And on the Cross, Jesus bears the emotional, spiritual and physical consequences of sin; he bears the breaking of relationship with God. But then, because Jesus is both human and divine, he rebuilds that bridge between us and God, prepares the way for us into God's kingdom and God's holy presence, now and forever.

When we read the Palm Sunday story, when we picture it in our minds and picture ourselves in the parade, even as we embrace the misguided joy of that cloak-throwing, palm-waving procession, and shout "hosanna" too – we know what's coming, don't we? That celebratory procession is poignant and a little bittersweet for us, because we know that Palm Sunday is inevitably followed by Good Friday.

The disciples are kind of quiet in this part of Mark's gospel; they didn't know the awful specifics the way we do, but they knew more than the crowd about what was coming; the whole triumphant procession was probably unsettling for them, too. Jesus had been telling his followers for a while now that he'd be handed over to the authorities and killed. So leaving his friend's home in Bethany that morning and making the two-mile trip to Jerusalem was something Jesus had been preparing himself and his friends for, and it was an

event that had long been promised in Scripture by the prophets.

As they are travelling, Jesus does something unusual and asks a couple of them to go on ahead and get him a particular donkey, that Jesus says will be tied up and ready for them. And they do and it is, and we're left with this curiously detailed interlude, all about transport arrangements. I wonder if this donkey-obtaining story is so carefully included because it signals an important change, from what's gone on between Jesus and his disciples in the past. Jesus does not say, "follow me to Jerusalem." Jesus says, "go on ahead." No longer is Jesus saying, come with me or follow me. Jesus is saying go ahead of me; prepare the way for me.

They don't appear much in this triumphal entry; we don't read about the disciples taking up palm branches or shouting along with the crowd in Mark's telling of the story. Jesus had already told them three times that he was going to die in the coming days at the hands of the Jerusalem authorities; Jesus also told them that in three days, he would rise again. To whatever extent they understood what Jesus was talking about, the disciples were in the know; they knew that this procession was not an occasion for uncomplicated celebration; that the way forward would be hard and rough before the end. But in Jesus' deceptively simple command for his disciples to go on ahead for that donkey, to prepare the way for him to enter Jerusalem, there's an echo of John the Baptist's cry, the first person to go on ahead of Jesus: "Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight."

This simple action of going on ahead of Jesus to get him his donkey is full of hope for those of us who follow Jesus today. Like the disciples, we are in the know; when we wave our palm branches and shout hosanna today, we are celebrating the right good news. Although we prepared his way to the Cross, we've also recognised the Cross as a symbol of the good news that we have prepared our hearts to receive.

And from that beginning, that new, abundant life within us, we can also, on the other side of Easter, participate in preparing Jesus' way into the world, toward the people and places and moments where Jesus is needed. Our world is still confusedly crying out for help, still in need of saving, still, sometimes, celebrating the wrong good news. For all that Jesus was not the kind of king the people wanted then, for all that the triumphal entry was neither a campaign march nor a conquering hero returning home, Jesus was and is the Messiah, saving us from the devastating and enduring oppression of sin and the suffering it causes.

As Christ's followers today, we are still tasked with going on ahead of him, into the places where Jesus needs to be, places where the kingdom of God can come, even now, in small but important ways, mending and healing, feeding and clothing, preparing the way for the grace, the freedom, the reconciliation with God and one another that Jesus offers us all by way of the Cross. Thanks be to God! Amen.