

Looking backwards and looking forwards

Palm Sunday – 2 April, 2023

INTRODUCING TODAY'S THEME

Hellos and goodbyes ...

Today is a day to formally say goodbye to the Hall ... and to give thanks for the past ... and to look forward with hope towards the future ...

As many of you would know, the brick hall has been used for many ministries in its 60 year history ...

- It was the first worship centre on this site before the current church was built ...
- It's been a place of hospitality ... for weddings, funerals, dinners
- It's been the place for ministries ranging from Playgroup and Mainly Music to youth group and sleep-overs
- It hosted Croydon Parish Players for many years and was the venue for plays, musicals and concerts ...
- It hosted numerous community groups looking for a place to meet
- The wooden hall hosted Maroondah Theatre, playgroup and events like labyrinths

Many of you will have memories of these and other events.

So today we are looking back with thanks – but also looking forward to how selling off the land these buildings sit on will fund and enhance future ministry and mission in this place.

BIBLE READINGS

Zechariah 9:9-10

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!

Shout, O daughter Jerusalem!

See, your king comes to you,

righteous and victorious,

humble and riding on a donkey,

on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

I will take away the chariots from Ephraim

and the war-horses from Jerusalem,

and the battle-bow will be broken.

He will proclaim peace to the nations.

His rule will extend from sea to sea
and from the River to the ends of the earth.

John 12:12-50

The next day a great crowd that had come for the Passover festival heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting,

‘Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!’

‘Blessed is the king of Israel!’

Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it, as it is written:

‘Do not be afraid, O daughter Zion;

see, your king is coming,

seated on a donkey’s colt.’

Now the crowd that was with him when he raised Lazarus from the tomb continued to spread the word. Many people, because they heard that he had performed this sign, went out to meet him. So the Pharisees said to one another, ‘See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!’

Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the festival. They came to Philip with a request. ‘Sir,’ they said, ‘we would like to see Jesus.’ Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.

Jesus replied, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; for where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honour the one who serves me.

Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? “Father, save me from this hour”? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name! ... When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself. He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.

MESSAGE

Palm Sunday is the day we remember Jesus riding a young donkey into Jerusalem while crowds wave palm branches ... and shout out greetings that suggest Jesus is the hoped for king or Messiah.

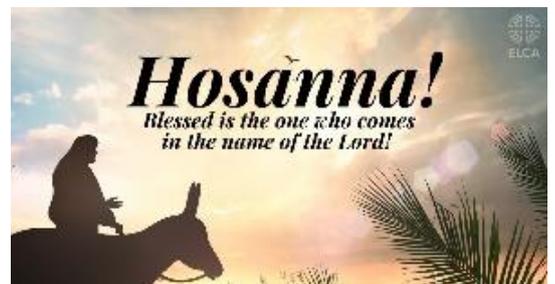
But why does this great crowd gather?

What have they seen and heard ... and what are they hoping for?



In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, the crowd has followed Jesus on the road all the way from Galilee and have heard his teaching and seen him perform mighty deeds of healing. In John's Gospel it's a little different. No doubt there were people coming from Galilee for the Passover festival, but also many folks from Jerusalem had joined the procession ... because they had seen or heard about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. With these two groups joining together to follow Jesus it's not surprising that the Pharisees are getting exasperated and grumble that the **whole world** has gone after Jesus.

The people shout '**Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!**' We may recognize these words from the Communion liturgy, but they originally come from Psalm 118, one of the psalms that



pilgrims to Jerusalem would sing as they walked towards Jerusalem. Hosanna is a cry meaning 'Save us!' The psalm tells the story of the king who has won a famous victory in battle and who is now returning to Jerusalem and entering the city to go up to the temple to give thanks to God.

**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.**

Zechariah 9:9 NRSV



John also notes that by choosing to ride into the city on a donkey, Jesus is acting out the prophecy from Zechariah that Israel's king would come to Jerusalem in humility and in peace, riding on a donkey.

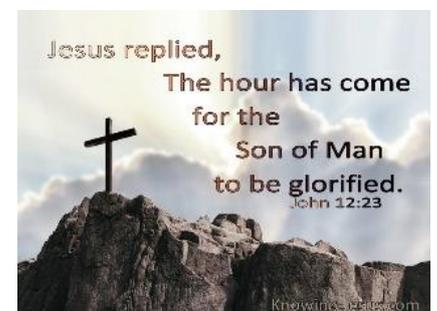
So it seems that Jesus is choosing to identify himself as Israel's king or Messiah and the people recognise him as such.

It's Passover time of course which only adds to people's expectations ... could Jesus really be the one to lead us to freedom just like Moses? Could he be the new King David to fight the Romans? ... Is this what Judas was expecting? But in the excitement, I wonder if the people knew where all this would lead? Did they really think that the Romans and the temple authorities would just sit back quietly and allow a new king to be crowned? We know from how the story goes from here that they acted swiftly and brutally to suppress any thought of an uprising. But it does make us wonder why Jesus provoked this reaction by deliberately acting out these Scriptures that pointed to him as the king or Messiah.



We then have a rather odd part of the story that's only in John's Gospel. Some **Greeks** – non-Jewish people – have come to join the Passover festival and they want to see Jesus. Why they are there and how they have heard about Jesus we are not told. But Philip and Andrew approach Jesus with their request.

For Jesus this is a sign that his **hour** has come, the time when his ministry will reach its climax. We know from reading the Gospel that **opposition** to Jesus has been steadily growing and the raising of Lazarus has now prompted the chief priests to act. So being aware of all this, perhaps Jesus recognises that he will soon be betrayed and killed.

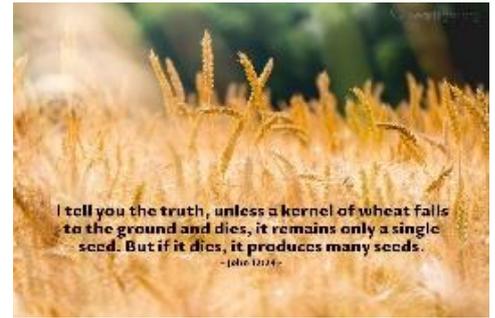


But this is not how Jesus views his hour, at least in John's Gospel. No, this is the hour when he will be **glorified**, and when **God's name** will be glorified and as Jesus is lifted up from the earth he will draw **all people** to himself.

In Jesus' mind, the fact that Jews from Galilee along with Jews from Jerusalem and now **non-Jewish people** are all seeking him out points to the conclusion that **all people** are hearing and responding to his message. We might recall those well-known words from chapter 3 that God so loved **the world** that he gave his one and only Son ... this is all part of God's message through Jesus

that's intended for the whole world to hear.

Jesus then uses the metaphor of a wheat seed that remains just a single seed unless it is planted in the ground and dies – or is transformed – and grows into a plant bearing many seeds. Jesus sees his death – which is the moment of his glorification –



being like the single seed that is sown to produce many seeds.

This is what Jesus' death will accomplish. This is how God's light will come into the world and how the world will be saved through the death of Jesus.

Whoever wants to follow Jesus must be prepared to go down this same path of suffering – and possibly even lose their own life – only to gain eternal forever life. I wonder if the crowds following Jesus on that Palm Sunday understood any of this ... that they are being asked to follow Jesus down a road of suffering and death ... which will, mysteriously, lead to amazing new life. Will they choose Jesus' way of life and light or will they choose to remain in darkness or to seek another road?

This Palm Sunday story speaks into our context today as we gather to remember and give thanks for the buildings and ministries that have taken place here at Tallent Street.



There are people here today who are like the followers of Jesus from Galilee who have faithfully followed the road Jesus has laid out over many years. You have worshipped and enjoyed meals in these buildings, you've been entertained and been involved in various ministries.

You have seen people come to faith and been nurtured in their faith. And following Jesus through all these years has mostly been good.

There are also people here today who are more like the people of Jerusalem ... perhaps you haven't experienced the full range of ministries in these

buildings, but you are glad to be part of the community today at Croydon Uniting Church.

For both groups, God has been faithful.

But today we reach a turning point in our life – a bit like Jesus entering Jerusalem on Palm Sunday – as we say goodbye to the familiar buildings that have served us well and enabled multiple ministries and mission to flourish. So we give thanks.

But like the crowds following Jesus into Jerusalem we don't know exactly what the future holds. We hope and pray that the sub-division of the land for housing will go smoothly and will fund the transformation of this church building into a flexible multi-use space that can be used for worship, hospitality, ministry, mission and more.

We hope there will be funds left over to support future ministry and mission.

We hope for amazing new life to come ...

... but there may well also be some suffering and death.

Our calling is to keep walking the path that Jesus lays before us ...

knowing that God is faithful ...

that Jesus offers us life and the encouragement to walk in his light ...

and that God's Spirit will walk with us and among us ...

Do we know where following Jesus will take us?

No ... but perhaps that's a good thing ... because if the crowd following Jesus on that Palm Sunday knew exactly what lay ahead, they might have all turned around and gone home and missed out on all the drama and heartache and joy and growing sense of community that was to come.

So let us be thankful today and also look to Jesus to show us the way ahead.