

Welcome to the Messiah!

24 March 2024 – Palm Sunday

INTRODUCING TODAY'S THEME

Today is Palm Sunday, the day we remember Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey and the crowds scattering branches on the road before him.

It's a day that's often associated with peace and peace marches.

So here in Melbourne there is usually a peace and justice march.

This year, however, they've changed the timing from 2 pm to 10.30 ... so the march and speeches are about to start.

Obviously it's challenging to be in two places at once! So Liz and I are here this morning joining you for worship rather than gathering in the city.

I do wonder, though, at the change in timing that directly clashes with Sunday worship for most Christians.

Do they not want Christians present?

Is the pursuit and advocacy for peace becoming a secular activity?

As followers of Jesus, how are we called to pursue peace?

BIBLE READINGS

Your word, O God, is a lamp to our feet,
and a light to our path.

Psalm 118:1, 19-26 (responsively)

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his steadfast love endures for ever!

Open to me the gates of righteousness,
**that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the Lord.**

This is the gate of the Lord;
the righteous shall enter through it.

I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.

The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.

This is the Lord's doing;
it is marvellous in our eyes.

This is the day that the Lord has made;

Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Save us (Hosanna!), we beseech you, O Lord!

O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!

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

We bless you from the house of the Lord.

Mark 11:1-11

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent ahead two of his disciples, saying to them, ‘Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, “Why are you doing this?” say, “The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.”’

They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, some people standing there asked, ‘What are you doing, untying that colt?’ They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go. When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted,

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

‘Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!’

‘Hosanna in the highest heaven!’

Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve.

Lord, may your word live in us
and bear much fruit to your glory.

MESSAGE [Welcome to the Messiah!](#)

Today we hear a simple story and yet an odd story.

At first sight, it’s a fairly simple story ... Jesus has reached the city of Jerusalem after a long pilgrimage from Galilee. He has clearly planned to be in Jerusalem at Passover, one of the three pilgrim festivals described in the Mosaic Law that all Jews were expected to attend.



Now Passover remembered and celebrated God’s deliverance of the people from slavery in Egypt. It was a very nationalistic festival, celebrating freedom and God’s deliverance. The Romans were alert during Passover looking for any signs of trouble or rioting.



Along the way from Galilee, Jesus has healed people and taught the disciples about who can enter God's kingdom and about how power will be exercised in God's kingdom – through serving others. Jesus has pointed out that he has not come as a great leader to be served and waited upon but as a servant who will give his life as a ransom for many.

In Mark's Gospel, this so called 'Way' section as Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem, is framed by two healings of blind people. So one of the underlying questions is who can see clearly and who is really blind when it comes to Jesus? Let's keep this in mind when we hear today's story and how events will unfold when Jesus reaches Jerusalem.

Gradually more and more people have joined the inner circle of disciples as Jesus slowly makes his way up towards Jerusalem. We might imagine that this growing group is happy and looking forward to celebrating Passover.

But Mark tones down the level of expectation.

Jesus has three times explained to the disciples that when he reaches Jerusalem he will be rejected by the priests and scribes – the religious heavyweights – and that he will suffer and be condemned to death before being handed over to the Gentiles who will mock him, spit upon him, flog him and kill him. Then, mysteriously, he will rise again three days later.



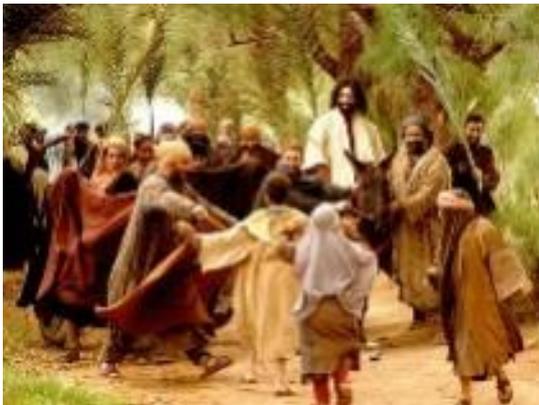
Mark writes that the crowd following Jesus are amazed at his teaching and healing but that they are also afraid.

One might expect that the story would jump straight to Jesus' confrontation with the religious leaders, that we might expect some kind of showdown.

But no, Mark slows the pace of the story right down to describe Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. And this is where the story gets a bit odd.

Up until now, Jesus has walked everywhere. This is just how most people got around most of the time. The Roman garrison stationed in Jerusalem had maybe 100 or 200 horses for some of its soldiers to ride that we hear about in the book of Acts. But everyone else walked.

So it's all a bit strange when Jesus gives detailed instructions to two of his disciples to go ahead and locate a colt – a donkey that has never been ridden – untie it and bring it to him. This request from Jesus was obviously unexpected and fairly memorable, which is why we have all the details recorded in Mark's story. In fact the finding of the donkey takes up over half of today's story.



When the donkey is found and brought to Jesus, the disciples throw some cloaks on it and Jesus sits on it.

We don't know how this went – the first time rider, Jesus, sitting on the first time ridden donkey. What could possibly go wrong?! It seems that rider and animal got along okay.

Rather than an inconspicuous entry into Jerusalem among the hundreds of other pilgrims, Jesus is clearly wanting to make a statement and to be noticed.

But what sort of statement is Jesus making?

The response of the crowds give us some clues. They shout:

*Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!
Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!*

Hosanna in the highest heaven!

There are references here to Psalm 118 that we shared earlier.

The first part of the psalm describes how the Lord – Yahweh – helped the king win a decisive victory in battle. He was surrounded on every side by armies of the nations but cried out to the Lord for help and won the battle.

The Lord is the king's strength and salvation. The king did not die but lived and now comes to Jerusalem to give thanks to God.

The part of the psalm we read then describes the response of the people welcoming the king into Jerusalem.

*Save us – Hosanna in Hebrew – O Lord! Grant us success.
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.*

The king, one imagines, then makes his way into the city and up to the temple where he praises God saying:

*You are my God and I will give thanks to you;
you are my God and I will extol you!*

So the crowds see Jesus as like the king from this psalm and welcome him into the city by singing words from the psalm.

This is reinforced by the line ‘Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!’. David was regarded as Israel’s greatest king who won victories over all the surrounding nations.

Israel had long hoped for a new king like David, a Messiah to deliver them from their current day enemies. Perhaps Jesus is that long hoped for Messiah?

And the significance of riding on the donkey?

Mark doesn’t make the connection explicit, but both Matthew and John quote a prophecy from Zechariah in describing Jesus’ entry into the city. It reads:

*Rejoice greatly, O daughter Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
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.
(Zechariah 9:9-10)*

So if we put all the pieces of the puzzle together as the Gospel writers invite us to do, then Jesus is clearly signaling to everyone with eyes to see and ears to hear that he is in fact the long awaited Messiah, the king, the one coming to Jerusalem to give thanks to God, the one riding humbly on a donkey, the one who will bring peace and who will rule to the ends of the earth.

But here the story diverges.

Many in the crowd enthusiastically join in the singing of the psalm. They hope that Jesus might indeed be this Messiah who will defeat the Romans and usher in a new era of peace.



What better time to kick off such a campaign than at Passover, where the people were remembering God's great deeds of the past in freeing the nation from slavery. What boldness from Jesus! What might he stir up?

Is this what the disciples were hoping for and expecting, ever since Peter correctly identified Jesus as the Messiah?

Mark, however, has provided plenty of clues that this version of the story is misguided and unlikely to happen. There are the repeated warnings from Jesus that rather than triumphing over his enemies, he will be rejected and killed by them. Then there is the statement from Jesus that he has come to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. And there is also the recognition that the disciples were uncertain and afraid, afraid of what might happen when they do reach Jerusalem.

So what are we to make of this story in 2024?

As we look around our neighbourhood, there's no doubt that many people are struggling – with rent, with the price of food, electricity and petrol bills. Sometimes we might think it would be great if Jesus could wave some sort of magic wand and solve all these problems.

But that's not what Jesus promised us.

Instead he taught us to love our neighbour and to follow his example of serving others.

If we turn our gaze further afield, we see bigger problems. This year, the fighting between Israel and Gaza is making the headlines as thousands are killed and thousands more face famine and starvation while efforts to bring about a ceasefire and relieve the suffering of many are quashed.

Last year, there were similar remarks about war between Ukraine and Russia, which is of course still going on.

We see the desperate need for peace in the world.

And who better to bring peace than the Messiah?

But again that's not what Jesus promised.

He said that there would be wars and famines, but we should focus on living righteous and compassionate lives. And we should also keep praying for God's kingdom of peace and justice to come here on the earth as it is in heaven.

As we walk through the coming days and remember the unfolding events of Easter, may we be reminded that Jesus is indeed our Messiah, but one who brings an upside-down sort of kingdom of love and service.

Amen.

LENT CANDLE LITURGY

On this sixth Sunday of Lent, Palm Sunday,
we remember Jesus' triumphant entry
into Jerusalem, the busy, festival city.

**We too are called to practice anticipation
in the midst of noisy commotion.**

Even as we extinguish this candle
**we accept the challenge of giving thanks in all conditions,
rehearsing God's reign of peace in the world.**