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Sermon for Palm Sunday [Mark 11:1-11]

Let's pray: Lord of Palm Sunday, prepare our hearts to ponder your words and actions as we learn to follow your way, with our words and actions.

[Slide/Picture of *Palm Sunday walk in Jerusalem*]

This coming week we'll be observing what Christians acknowledge as the greatest week in the history of our planet. And the events of the *first* Holy Week are still being commemorated and re-enacted all over the world because of the lasting impact it had on the lives of so many. Annually, global pilgrims join local Christian Palestinians in the thousands to join in a Palm Sunday walk from the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem as a joyful reenactment of the gospel's account of Jesus's triumphant entry into that city. They gather on the Mount of Olives at the church of Bethpage and descend from it through the Kedron Valley and up into and through the gates of Jerusalem, the path is adorned with flags from many countries, palm fronds and olive branches lifted high, as songs in different languages, and "Hosannas" ring out. If you google it, you'll find tons of footage showing the road they take, displaying the incredible atmosphere there... communicating the *joy* of the crowd, and the meaning and occasion they attach to it.

I certainly remember this Sunday fondly from childhood, perhaps because of the tangible aspect of the palm fronds inside the church, the laying down of cloaks, a drama, or even a real animal incorporated into our services. Like earlier, palm leaves were brought down here and we sang Hosanna in the Highest, in *remembrance* of that first Palm Sunday when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey.

The festive atmosphere of today anticipates the even greater joy of Easter Sunday to come - *the* most celebrated Sunday of the Church Year – but what about the events of the week in between? How do we, or are we *right* to celebrate Palm Sunday as a joyful event, a day of praise and hope? Because *unlike* the cheering crowd lining the road in Jerusalem who didn't have the gift of hindsight to grasp where the path was actually leading Him - we sense, and *know* the terrible ordeal that is ahead of Jesus...

And what *did* they know? *Hosanna* is often thought of as a declaration of praise, much like hallelujah, but it's an appeal for salvation.

[Slide: *We beg you, O Lord, save us! Please, give us success! Psalm 118:25*]

You can see that in Psalm 118:25 "We beg you, O Lord, save us! Please, give us success!" which in the original Hebrew wording *yasha* = ("deliver, save") and *anna* = ("beg, beseech") combined forms the English word hosanna, which literally means "I beg you to save!" or "please deliver us!". So, the crowd were petitioning Jesus to "save us now!", for liberty, victory, and prosperity - and was enthusiastic because it saw Zechariah's well-known prophecy "See, your king comes to you ... lowly and riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey (9:9)" being fulfilled before their eyes. So yes, they were rightly praising and welcoming Jesus as their Saviour - even though it would soon be revealed he is a different kind of *king* to anything they could imagine.

[Slide: *Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Psalm 118:26*]

Naturally, the adoration of the crowd as they shouted this phrase from Psalm 118: "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord", and their pleas for Jesus to liberate them - "Hosanna" - played right into his opponents' fears - they were already concerned about the impact He wielded and wondered what they should do: "This man is performing many miraculous signs. If we let Him go on like this, everyone will believe in Him (John 11:48)." So, they plotted to get rid of him, to put Jesus to death. And thus Palm Sunday also marks the beginning of the Passion, or suffering, of Christ. The moment of truth is at hand. What will happen with this itinerant preacher from Galilee? On Palm Sunday expectations are high, by Good Friday... they are all but dashed.

Jesus was aware of what His enemies planned to do with Him and could've easily entered Jerusalem quietly. Instead, and with immense courage, the itinerant preacher from Galilee intentionally entered the hub of opposition to Him *publicly* when He chose to reveal who He really is – the anointed Messiah, a King.

He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. It was hardly a regal entrance. He had no kingly entourage and the unorganised, shouting mob, tearing branches from trees and taking their cloaks off to pave His way would have been a laughingstock in the eyes of the Romans. Still, a long trail of signs and wonders attended Him. He was locally famous. His miracles were incontestable. And he *deliberately* orchestrated the donkey as one expression of the purpose for His coming ... as a harbinger of peace.

In ancient Middle East, Kings rode off to war on *horses* with their accompanying army but rode on donkeys when they came in peace. So here was Jesus on a donkey, clearly claiming to be King - but arriving in humility, as the King of Peace. He entered Jerusalem deliberately refusing the role of a militant, political saviour – with no display of power... why?

[Slide: Image showing map/Jerusalem, Mount of Olives and Kedron Valley]

Jerusalem is built on Mount Zion, opposite the Mount of Olives, with the Valley of Kedron in between. The road to it from the Mount of Olives winds around the mountain, down into the Valley, and up again to its many gates. Today in Jerusalem, pilgrims will be following that *same* route.

In today's Gospel story Jesus is about to descend Mt Olives into the valley, and up into the city. In a deeper sense, He is about to travel down into bitter conflict with his enemies; down to the final confrontation, arrest, accusations, trial, and condemnation; down to the agony of torture, crucifixion, death, and burial. *That* was the huge valley in front of Him, and Jesus was going to walk that journey.

But it was not the end of the journey. There was another path leading upwards. Ahead of Jesus was also his glorious resurrection; his reunion with his disciples; and his ascension into heaven.

*When you think about it, the peaks and valleys of Holy Week would've felt like an emotional rollercoaster ride for His followers. Hope, joy, doubt, fear, disappointment, grief, despair, surprise, astonishment, rapture, and elation no doubt showed up in the hearts and minds of those who witnessed His journey!

So the lowly entrance to Jerusalem, albeit cementing his kingship through fulfillment of the prophecy, points to the *real* purpose of his coming"

As Henri Nouwen articulates:

“Jesus presents to us the great mystery of the *descending* way. It is the way of suffering, but also the way to healing. It is the way of humiliation, but also the way to the resurrection. It is the way of tears, but of tears that turn into tears of joy. It is the way of hiddenness, but also the way that leads to the light that will shine for all people. It is the way of persecution, oppression, martyrdom, and death, but also the way to the full disclosure of God’s love.”

Jesus is the revelation of God’s unending, unconditional love for us humans and everything he has done, said, and undergone is meant to show us that the love we most long for is given to us by God – not because we deserve it, but because God is a God of love.

How beautiful are Rohr’s words, also reminding us of *why*:

[Slide: *Jesus did not come to change the mind of God about humanity. He came to change the mind of humanity about God.*]

“Jesus did not come to change the mind of God about humanity. He came to change the mind of humanity about God.”

...

The story is told of an American travelling on a bus in Norway. He was bragging to the Norwegian man sitting next to him, how much more accessible, in theory, the American president was to his citizens, compared to heads of state and royalty in other countries. After the Norwegian got off the bus, another passenger said to the American: “In Norway, our King rides on a bus with his subjects.” Apparently, the American tourist had been talking to the King of Norway...

Jesus is a humble King who rides on the bus with us and shows us the very heart of God. He lived to show us how to love and he loves spending time with those who need His healing power and help. He is as accessible to us as that Norwegian King riding on a bus was to his people.

Jesus redefined kingship that first Palm Sunday in terms of loving service, humility, and accessibility.

He *is*:

“the Servant King”

[Slide: *The servant king*]

...who entered Jerusalem with a ragtag group of socially marginalised, struggling, ordinary, followers and friends. He’s also likely to be found associating with the most unlikely of people, those neglected by the powerful or selfish - but greatly treasured by Him. He went out of His way to go to remote towns and culturally-perceived dodgy places to meet the needs of the diseased, impoverished, disabled, mentally distressed, shunned, neglected, uncared for – to get along side of rather than above them.

And they saw and found in Jesus, hope.

Revered Indian leader Gandhi, an advocate of inclusivity, tolerance, and nonviolent resistance, was once asked, “If you were given the power to remake the world, what would you do first?” Gandhi replied, “I would pray for the power to renounce that power.” Following Jesus’ example, he preferred to be a servant of his people rather than a powerbroker, and to operate by the power of love.

Yes, the paradox of his entry as king, one who could claim a worldly power in the eyes of the crowd that day, yet chose to renounce it for service, and obedience to God..

Like Gandhi, our journey is also connected to the one Christ takes in Holy Week. St Paul's says we are to have the same mind, the same attitude, that Christ had. It's a call to us to learn from Him, to learn *humility and service*.

For Jesus is:

[slide:
***the Servant King -
who calls us now to follow Him
to bring our lives as a daily offering
of worship to the Servant King.***]

It is a call to show that attitude of humility and service in the way we treat and think of others. Jesus was always concerned for what others needed from him, not what he wanted from others, his life was one of self-sacrifice. Our lives are destined to become like the life of Jesus - we are called as God's people. That's a great honour - but rather than demand honour, glory and privilege for ourselves, before God and because of Jesus, we can let go of our pride, our selfish ambitions, our desire for power and comfortability. Jesus came to give us his own life, to lift us up into loving community with the Father. Only when we fully recognise the radical purpose of His ministry will we be able to understand the meaning of the spiritual life. Everything that belongs to Jesus is given for us to receive. All that Jesus does we may also do.

Indeed, listen to those wonderful words from Micah:

[slide:
***"He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God Micah 6:8"***]

Christian life, like the life of Christ, is giving of ourselves - the more we've received, the more we can give of ourselves. He invites us to treasure those He calls us to serve and see them as His gifts to us. Reconciled to God, we do so in the faith and trust that He lifts us up in the power of his unconditional love and forgiveness. And Jesus has promised to remain faithful to us, even when we find following Him tough going.

You see, this is the Jesus, who as one Gospel tells us, set his face like a flint and went up to Jerusalem, knowing what he was getting himself into and harbouring no illusions about a *comfortable* outcome.

[Slide: ***I offered my back to those who beat me,
my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard;
I did not hide my face
from mocking and spitting. Isaiah 50:5b-6***]

Surrounded by cheering pilgrims on the way to celebrate Passover, Jesus was not deluded by the show of support. For months, maybe years, he had known there could only one result. And that would be so horrible, He could hardly dare think about the details and likely he suppressed them from his mind until later among the olive trees in the garden of Gethsemane, when in ultimate distress the small capillaries on his forehead ruptured and he sweated blood.

On that Palm Sunday, he understood the outcome. He knew that his entry to Jerusalem on that small donkey was literally a fatal move on his part. It would hasten rejection and death – the cruellest of suffering.

Skip to our final reading at the end of this service... the passage from Isaiah speaks of the servant's suffering and shame at the hands of his enemies - the cost of choosing to be faithful to a divine calling – see the words on this slide.

But then...God's *vindication* of the servant's obedience!

**[Slide: *Because the Sovereign Lord helps me,
I will not be disgraced.
Therefore have I set my face like flint,
and I know I will not be put to shame.
He who vindicates me is near. Isaiah 50:7-8a*]**

Like Isaiah, Jesus believed his sacrifice and the apparent waste of his life, would somehow be redemptively used by God. Against all common sense, he believed that God would defend him.

The good news is that He was right, and we *can* celebrate this Passion Sunday with joy, because Jesus was vindicated.

In God's hands, suffering for the sake of righteousness can be redemptive!

So, as we follow Jesus' journey to resurrection *through* the cross this coming week, let's ponder the cost of discipleship. There are times in the Christian life when loving and living into God's calling comes at a price. God's help was the source of Christ's courage and hope in the midst of suffering – and He who declared His, and thus our, innocence, will be our strength too! God wanted to liberate us, not by removing suffering but by sharing it with us – and Jesus is God-who-suffers-with-us, the compassionate one who gets along side of us – who renounced His power to “ride on the bus with us” to show us the heart of God.

And today after following Christ on his journey towards Jerusalem, even with the knowledge that it leads to the Cross, we *can* pause at the beginning of Holy Week and celebrate Palm Sunday, preparing to watch and commemorate those life changing events of Jesus' passion, and then, His resurrection.

We don't need to physically go to Jerusalem like so many pilgrims do on Palm Sunday, but we *can* join in with the crowd on the Mt of Olives who were right to praise Christ as the Saviour and their King - though they couldn't anticipate the *whole* road he would take from there. We *can*, and through the peaks and valleys of the coming week and the emotions it engenders, knowing we are reconciled to God, we are free to celebrate, to serve, and love others - because he first loved us.

We pray:

Come Lord Jesus,
and show us your kindness and your gentleness,
you who are humble of heart.
Let your obedient service enlighten and inspire us.

God of Palm Sunday,
endower each of us with the courage and humility to follow the Way of Christ,
that His love at work in us may enable us to do much better than seems humanly possible.
Amen.