**Celebrating the King** March 28 2021 Mark 11:1-11

The story of Palm Sunday is deeply steeped in the culture of its day. I recall as a child wondering why we celebrated this day so enthusiastically, it seemed to me an interesting story, quaint and somewhat difficult to relate to in the present. We don’t wave branches, put clothing on the ground for a colt to walk on, we don’t have parades where someone riding a donkey is celebrated.

We have parades to celebrate football stars and war veterans, but nothing like this. We are not even a country that has parades celebrating national leaders. In Australia we don’t emphasise civic parades, even the installation of a new Prime Minister gains minimal attention. So it may take some intentional effort to identify with this scene.

This was not a political parade. It was not a political celebration, it was a religious festival. In the midst of this well known religious festival, this parade occurs, hence it does not cause any consternation amongst the political leaders of the day.

**The Passover**

It was Passover, a time of celebration, thanksgiving and remembrance. Passover was a time of joyous celebration of the liberation that God has accomplished for God’s people. Our celebrations of God are deeply restrained, most unlike our antecedent tradition in Judaism. There would have been lots of noise, singing, dancing, shouting. Their whole bodies would have been involved, it was a time for exuberance. Our closest modern equivalent may be the worship of our Pentecostal brothers and sisters.

Historically we know that at the feast of Tabernacles bunches of palms, willow and myrtle were waved whenever the word Hosanna was used in the liturgy.[[1]](#footnote-1) So it is understandable that a similar practice took place during this parade.

We also know that there was a strong sense of expectation that God would send the Messiah to rescue God’s people from Roman oppression. As the passage reminded us they were expecting “the coming kingdom of our ancestor David”,[[2]](#footnote-2) as they described it. So we can imagine some of the passion with which they approached this event and their enthusiastic shouts as Jesus moved towards Jerusalem.[[3]](#footnote-3) There was an expectation that when God was revealed as King of all the earth that this would happen in Jerusalem.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This was a joyous celebration. Likewise Palm Sunday is a joyous celebration in the church year as we celebrate Jesus our King and the breaking in of God’s Kingdom.

**The Pilgrimage**

The celebration was preceded **by pilgrimage.** (Lent) A time of preparation of reflecting on the goodness of God towards humanity throughout time and more specifically towards themselves in their circumstances. Psalms 113-118 were used to give the people a focus in their thanksgiving to God and in their prayers as they pilgrimaged towards the celebrations of the feasts of Passover and Tabernacles.[[5]](#footnote-5)

These psalms form a comprehensive collection of psalms of praise. They praise God for God’s incomparable nature and acts, for God’s care for the down-trodden, for the deliverance that their ancestors experienced from captivity in Egypt, for God’s help day by day, for God’s steadfast everlasting love, for God’s help in times of illness, for the reliability of God, for God’s help in times of personal distress and fearfulness, for the ways in which God rescued them, and for the blessings of each new day. These psalms bring reassurance and confidence to the people enabling them to bring their prayers to God.

The concept of pilgrimage is the concept of spending time intentionally separating yourself from your usual daily affairs, the usual activities of work, recreation and social interactions in order to focus attentively upon God.

This season of lent likewise is a season in the church’s year for reflection and preparation as we approach the Easter season. Pheme Perkins has said that “Lent should be a time for a communal journey in which adults share their faith and prepare for the three days that celebrate the Easter mysteries: Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

It may be helpful for us to reflect on how we have been going with taking time to spiritually prepare for Easter. How much have we changed our routines? How much have we stood back from our busyness to reflect?

**The person of Jesus**

Palm Sunday reminds us of who Jesus really is. We celebrate Jesus as King Jesus, God’s promised Messiah, yet we also recognise that Jesus came to us as a suffering servant, willing to give his life that we may know God, that our sin may be forgiven, that we may experience life in all its fullness. We celebrate a King who serves, a Saviour who epitomises love, we celebrate God in human flesh. Jesus kingship is “A kingship of hidden majesty, of humble power to save.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

You may remember the famous reflection, “One Solitary Life” by James Allen Francis.

“He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant. He grew up in another village, where he worked in a carpenter shop until he was 30. Then, for three years, he was an itinerant preacher.  
He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family or owned a home. He didn't go to college. He never lived in a big city. He never travelled 200 miles from the place where he was born. He did none of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but himself.

… [however] all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned--put together--have not affected the life of man on this earth as much as that one, solitary life.”

In our information age, there is a great deal of mis-information and ignorance regarding Jesus. Many people in our own families and friendship groups may have very confused ideas about Jesus. Jesus is often esteemed as a great moral teacher in society but this is a grossly inadequate description. As C. S. Lewis famously said in his book *Mere Christianity,*

“A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

In our age the church is often seen to be irrelevant to people in general. What is it that the church has to offer our communities? An understanding of Jesus as a fine teacher fails to deal with the deepest needs of our hearts.

As we celebrate Palm Sunday we think of the cry of the crowd, “Hosanna” which really means “save us”. This one we celebrate, is the One sent to save us, the one who can transform our lives, the one who has enabled us to know and relate to God personally. So how may we honour Jesus, our Saviour in our times? What may be our equivalent of spreading our cloaks on the road?

How much is our commitment to Christ evident in our love for our neighbour, including the marginalised neighbour, the neighbour who is homeless, the neighbour who is gripped by the power of addiction? Are we ready to be inconvenienced, misunderstood or rejected by choosing Jesus path of servanthood?

1. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St Mark,* (Cambridge: Cambridge university Press, 1959) 351 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mark 11:10a NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Donald English, *The Message of Mark,* (Leicester: Inter Varsity Press, 1992) 186 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This emerged from understandings of Zechariah 14 particularly. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark,* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1974) 397 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Pheme Perkins, “The Gospel of Mark: Introduction, Commentary and reflections” in Leander E. Keck, *The New Interpreters Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes,*(Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995) 660 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. English, *The Message of Mark,* 185 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)