

**Call to Worship**

As we begin our worship these words are for thinking today: 'This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it! Let palms wave, in high 'hosannas.' Let coats and cloaks create a path: the unloosed colt and untamed Rabbi ride, to usher in the coming kingdom. Hosanna, hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Let us worship God!'

**Hymn – All glory, laud and honour,**

**Prayer of Adoration & Praise**

We clear our heads, we still our hearts and we come before God in prayer, let us pray.

Hallelujah, hallelujah, rejoice the Lord is here!

We greet you, Lord, for it is you that we come to worship this day: you alone, for you are King, hosanna, hosanna!

It is our privilege and pleasure to lay our lives before you and proclaim faithfulness to the Kingdom you seek for the world.

Though we try hard, we recognise that we are not perfect, and we make many mistakes: some small; some large; sometimes we deny you; sometimes we withhold love; sometimes we reduce others to tears; sometimes we cause hurt.

Yet, Father, forgiveness is your promise to us. Though we remain undeserving, this day we thank you for the assurance of mercy which you extend to us. May we respond with a new willingness to live faithfully in this world; working for the good of all.

For all this we ask in Jesus' name, who taught us when we pray together to say; Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive others that sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

**Readings: Psalm 118: 1 – 2, 19 – 29**

Give thanks to the Lord, because he is good, and his love is eternal. <sup>2</sup> Let the people of Israel say, "His love is eternal."

<sup>19</sup> Open to me the gates of the Temple; I will go in and give thanks to the Lord! <sup>20</sup> This is the gate of the Lord; only the righteous can come in. <sup>21</sup> I praise you, Lord, because you heard me, because you have given me victory. <sup>22</sup> The stone which the builders rejected as worthless turned out to be the most important of all. <sup>23</sup> This was done by the Lord; what a wonderful sight it is! <sup>24</sup> This is the day of the Lord's victory; let us be happy, let us celebrate! <sup>25</sup> Save us, Lord, save us! Give us success, O Lord! <sup>26</sup> May God bless the one who comes in the name of the Lord. From the Temple of the Lord we bless you. <sup>27</sup> The Lord is God; he has been good to us. With branches in your hands, start the festival and march around the altar. <sup>28</sup> You are my God, and I give you thanks; I will proclaim your greatness. <sup>29</sup> Give thanks to the Lord, because he is good, and his love is eternal.

## **Mark 11: 1 – 11**

### **The Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem**

**11** As they approached Jerusalem, near the towns of Bethphage and Bethany, they came to the Mount of Olives. Jesus sent two of his disciples on ahead <sup>2</sup> with these instructions: “Go to the village there ahead of you. As soon as you get there, you will find a colt tied up that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. <sup>3</sup> And if someone asks you why you are doing that, say that the Master<sup>[a]</sup> needs it and will send it back at once.”

<sup>4</sup> So they went and found a colt out in the street, tied to the door of a house. As they were untying it, <sup>5</sup> some of the bystanders asked them, “What are you doing, untying that colt?”

<sup>6</sup> They answered just as Jesus had told them, and the crowd let them go. <sup>7</sup> They brought the colt to Jesus, threw their cloaks over the animal, and Jesus got on. <sup>8</sup> Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches in the field and spread them on the road. <sup>9</sup> The people who were in front and those who followed behind began to shout, “Praise God! God bless him who comes in the name of the Lord! <sup>10</sup> God bless the coming kingdom of King David, our father! Praise be to God!”

<sup>11</sup> Jesus entered Jerusalem, went into the Temple, and looked around at everything. But since it was already late in the day, he went out to Bethany with the twelve disciples.

### **Hymn – Meekness and Majesty**

## Sermon – ‘What If ...’

What if, having left Jericho, Bethpage and Bethany, Jesus got on His young donkey, got to the top of the Mount of Olives, looked down on the ancient city of Jerusalem beneath Him, and decided to turn away and go back into Galilean obscurity to work as a carpenter?

What if Jesus, having planned to ride in on a young donkey, had been denied using the donkey and had walked in instead? What if Jesus had not been greeted by palm waving crowds but instead had been hounded out by a stone throwing mob who recognised Him as the ‘troublemaker’ He was?

What if the religious authorities, possibly watching from the walls of the city as, yet another procession came into town, quietly arranged for Jesus’ secret assassination; a silent knife in the back in the dark of one of Jerusalem’s interminable narrow streets?

What if the Roman soldiers, under Pontius Pilate’s direction, arrested Jesus on the spot, as a clear threat to public law and order, and kept Him locked up in the Antonia fortress for months, slowly starving Him to death, or releasing Him, shattered, emaciated, broken, long after the Passover?

History is littered with ‘what ifs’ and so is the Bible and so, is the story of the life of Jesus. It is hard to tell where the purpose of God and the freewill of those involved run parallel to each other, or counter to each other. Were there always going to be point of decision or choices to be made, or was everything some sort of ‘Divine train track’ with the destination unalterable and never in doubt?

It is ironic that today’s Gospel reading is entitled ‘The Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem’ whilst the content is about the plans that Jesus made for that first Palm Sunday. Different commentators have labelled this even as ‘political street theatre’. The ‘Triumphant Entry’ in Mark’s Gospel only comes in one short verse, where Jesus entered Jerusalem, went to the Temple, had a quick look around, and returned to Bethany.

There are no children in Mark’s account. The only Disciple shown following Jesus into Jerusalem with any enthusiasm, was not one of the twelve, but Bartimaeus, a blind man Jesus had healed on the road out of Jericho. Yes, I know we look at this story with the advantage of hindsight, as we know what happens next. Yet, I wonder, did the Disciples have any inkling? Or the authorities? Or the crowds? Almost certainly not.

Did Jesus? Did He know that this time, going into Jerusalem, would be near the end of His life, and that within days, He would have been betrayed, convicted, mocked, beaten and crucified? We will only know when we meet Him face-to-face.

However, what we do know, is that Jesus planned this piece of political theatre with great care. He planned to make a point. He planned to parody the arrival of the Roman governor, in from the coastal city of Caesarea, on the shores of the Mediterranean. The governor, coming to Jerusalem, not for any religious reason, not for the Passover, but to take charge of careful crowd control. Jesus planned to take the opportunity of the huge Passover crowds from all over the Roman Empire, pilgrims and tourists, who might vent their anger and frustration against the Roman occupation. After all, Passover is the Jewish celebration of liberation from the unjust and cruel domination of the Hebrews in Pharaoh's Egypt.

When Pilate, entered Jerusalem from the west, he would come with an excessive show of military pomp and circumstance. A huge group of cavalry and foot soldiers, Pilate himself riding an impressive stallion, his entry into Jerusalem a demonstration of the ever-present Roman power.

On the east side of the city, Jesus comes in on the back of a young donkey, with a few of His friends and followers. Instead of weapons – palm branches. Instead of military commands – shouts of hosanna. This is 'guerrilla theatre', poking fun at the Romans, who would not have understood if they had seen it. Only then, having entered Jerusalem, Jesus has a look around the Temple, already thinking of the demonstration the next day, when He overturned the tables of the moneychangers.

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was not only a provocative challenge to the military and religious authorities. It was a challenge to His followers. It is a challenge to each one of us. I wonder, what 'kind' of leader do you want Jesus to be? What kind of figure do we need Jesus to be? What kind of role do we want Jesus to play? What, at the end of it all, do we 'make' of Jesus? And, what if He did this, and what if He did that?

As we stand at the door of Holy Week, as we ask the 'what if' questions about Jesus and Who He was and what He came to do, I have the strongest impression, that Jesus does the same right back at us. Jesus says to us today; 'What if ... you follow Me? What if ... you share My worldview? What if ... you reorder your priorities to mirror mine? What if ... you stand up for what you believe? What if ... your faith made a difference to the way you really lead your daily life?

If Palm Sunday, was 'decision-time' for Jesus, it is decision-time for us as we follow Jesus. Did Jesus have to go into Jerusalem? I believe this organised demonstration, right at the beginning of His stay in the city, shows that Jesus obviously felt that He had to take His alternative message of the Kingdom, of the reign of God, into Jerusalem, which was the centre of power and wealth in first century Palestine.

Jesus was aware of the risks, but He believed in His message and did not want to hide it. The question for us, as followers of Jesus, and for community is which kind of demonstration do we want to support or even be part of. Are we on the side of the powers that be, supporters of the status quo, with its injustice and inequality, resulting in wars, poverty, hunger and the destruction of creation? Or are we, rather, on the side of God's rule, with its non-violent, creative movement of peace, justice, equality and love for all of God's children? Do we shout the welcoming 'Hosanna' at Jesus or a hostile 'Crucify Him'?

What if ... we were to take a stand against prejudice and discrimination? What if we were to challenge, continuously, all political parties and those soon seeking election, to give proper answers to questions regarding, economic recovery, the funding of the NHS, the future of education, our future relationship with the European Union, the care of the elderly, the eradication of racism, the disgrace of human trafficking, proper equality for all genders and sexualities, how to end climate change? What if ... we could offer a word of hope and compassion to all those who are living in despair and fear today?

What if ... we could realise that not all change is bad and not all tradition is deadly? What if ... we went against culture and made 'church-going' or 'service-attending' our weekly, non-negotiable habit, for sanctuary, reflection, encouragement and wonder? What if ... we reached out this week to someone we have not seen at worship for a while?

What if ... we came to the two Holy Week services to learn a little more about the physicality of that week and open our thinking up about our faith? What if ... we lived like we believe that God is still speaking? What if ... we determined that yes, we will follow Jesus, and work at what we believe and how we behave?

And, what if ..., after all those 'what ifs', Jesus got off His little donkey, looked us right in the face, and blessed us? Do you know, there is no 'what if...' about it!

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

## **Hymn – Ride on! ride on in majesty!**

### **Prayer for Ourselves and Others**

We unite our hearts again in prayer, let us pray.

Lord of life, we owe you a great deal, a debt that cannot be repaid in full, yet you call us to live faithfully and be abundant in the good we offer this world and its people. Receive from us today these gifts we offer and use them for good in the world.

Father God, the children of Israel sang praises and welcomed Jesus. They spread before him palms and cloaks and rejoiced at his coming.

With similar emotion, we come before him this day: we come with a deep sense of thanksgiving for life is good. All that is made available to us, we seek not to take for granted but to recognise all of it as your gift to us. While we offer thanks, we recognise that too many in our world have less access to the good things of life than we do.

Today we call upon your Spirit to lead us towards deeds of goodness and justice: that the poor may be lifted by our work, that the sick and needy may be healed by the comfort and support we offer, that the grieving are led to see the opportunities that are still awaiting as we offer them support and gentle encouragement, that the voiceless are given a voice by our readiness to advocate for them, that those who are oppressed are set free by our campaigning for a fairer world.

Hear us as we stay silent a while, recalling our family and friends...

### *Silence*

Those we name before you are precious to us and our concern for them is large. Yet your concern for all your children is even vaster. We thank you for that unconditional love. We are loved. All are loved. And we see that love in the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

## **Hymn – My song is love unknown,**

### **Benediction**

It is not about our voices or our excitement or our fickle natures that turn from “Hosanna!” to “Crucify!” It is about his willingness to take the road anyway, wherever it leads, and to keep on going even when the noise of the crowds died away and when

friends abandoned him; to keep on going when the silence became eerie and when the end was in sight. He kept on going. It's not about us. It's all about him.

So, we go to stand in the shadows amidst the trees of the Garden of Gethsemane, amidst the crowds at the Praetorium and then at the foot of the cross, knowing that through these events, God's blessing will rest upon you and all those whom you love, this Palm Sunday and forevermore. Amen

**Closing Song – The Blessing (Symphonic Version)**