

Jesus takes our burdens to Jerusalem and sets us free

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Palm Sunday

Outside *Introduction to the liturgy of the Palms*

The Temple Mount looks out east across to the steep side of the Mount of Olives – the triumphal procession down the mountain will be like a slow-moving tableau. The Roman HQ, the Antonia fortress, at the NW corner of the Temple Mount commands a clear view over both the Temple precinct, and the Mount of Olives.

The soldiers will watch everything from their battlements. They'll know it's not an insurrection – it's clear that these aren't insurgents. More likely it's a factional battle brewing between groups of religious lunatics.

And the Temple authorities will be watching too, trying to measure the threat; preparing strategies to quench this dangerous new movement. If they don't stop it quickly, Roman soldiers will swarm onto the Temple Mount and impose martial law before you know it.

The Palm Sunday Gospel calls us to join the crowd of people who surround Jesus, and to choose to walk with him.

Sermon: The people were calling verses from Psalm 118 to Jesus

Ps 118.25 Hosanna Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success! ²⁶ Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

Everyone who's anyone has gone to Jerusalem – to conquer her, to control her, to rescue her, to avenge her.

David captured it from the Jebusites (1000 BCE) ^{2 Sam 5} – **Sennacherib**, King of Assyria came to take it from Hezekiah, but was mysteriously turned back (701 BCE) ^{2 Chron 32} – The army of **Nebuchadnezzar**, king of Babylon sacked the city and carried the people off into exile (586 BCE) ^{2 Kings 25} – **Alexander the Great** took it and moved on (332 BCE) – Julius Caesar's general **Pompey** took it (63 BCE) and **Caesar** came again in 47 – **Caliph Omar** (Arabian) (638 CE) – **Baldwin I** Crusader King (1099) – **Sala'adin** (Sultan of Egypt and Syria) (1187) – **The Mamluk Pashas** (Egyptians) (1250-1517) – **Suleiman the Magnificent** Ottoman Sultan (Turks) (1517-1918) – **Napoleon's** Palestinian campaign ended with an outbreak of plague amongst his troops (1799) – **Theodor Herzl** & **Kaiser Wilhelm** both visited the Ottoman rulers (1898) – The British **General Allenby** strode in ahead of his troops (Dec 1917) – The **Arab Legion** marched in (1948) – **Israeli forces** took it in (1967)

They all rode or strode into Jerusalem – or would have done if they could. How many of these names do we remember hearing about? Among these are the names of some of the most famous generals in history. We can't say much about some of them, but what can we say about their followers? Lots of them thought they were joining a mission to save Jerusalem from the infidel. But they came to do it with swords or guns or bombs. None of them or their leaders are remembered as Saviour, whatever their motives.

Today, we accompany another who rode into Jerusalem. Today, we join a crowd of ordinary people who line the path down the Mount of Olives to shout with hope and joy: not for a general with an army, but a prince of peace. He's perched on the back of a tiny donkey that jiggles its unceremonious way towards Jerusalem. Jesus is probably terrified. He knows he's been marked out as a troublemaker, yet here he is, carrying out a deliberate plan to expose himself to the danger of judicial murder.

And we're shouting; we're crying out to him to save us from *his* murderers and *our* oppressors. That's what we're shouting. We're bellowing out words from Psalm 118.25-26 אֲשׁוּרָה וְאֲשׁוּרָה אֲשׁוּרָה וְאֲשׁוּרָה אֲשׁוּרָה וְאֲשׁוּרָה אֲשׁוּרָה. And one word in particular: hosanna – the cry of oppressed people – 'save us, we beseech you'; we're cheering on this very vulnerable man on a little donkey; calling him to save the people.

The generals, sultans, caliphs, kings, emperors and armies turned people into enemies then captives; into slaves; into subjects; into displaced persons and refugees. They all took what wasn't theirs. Jesus wasn't going to do that; he'd be different. Or was he? Strangely enough, in that one respect, he wasn't different. Like all those others, he also took what wasn't his: but what he took set people free.

That costly perfume the woman anointed him with; that was for her dowry, or if not, for the poor if the disciples had their way. **Judas's betrayal**, he took that too, even though it wasn't his to take. **The authority of the chief priests and Pilate** took it right out of their hands by refusing to justify himself to them. He took **Barabbas's execution** from him. He took **the crowd's capriciousness** – 'hosanna' one day, 'crucify' the next – took it without comment. He took **the soldiers' boredom and mocking cruelty**. He took **Simon of Cyrene's help** even though it wasn't offered. He took **Herod's kingship** with the inscription on his cross. He took **the contempt of passers-by, of priests and scribes, and of one of the criminals crucified with him**. He took **our death** to set us free. And in death, he took the **centurion and his cohort's confession** of belief.

We discover ourselves in each of those people. We discover that we can't just be bystanders watching Jesus pass by. He'll take something from us – respect, indignation, shame, dishonour, authority, fear, disbelief, death – and in its place, we will find ourselves transformed; he will be our teacher and we his disciples, and nothing will ever be the

same again.

Let's close our eyes for a few moments and in the silence, imagine ourselves in the crowd by that roadside. Feel the surprise of his passing, so unceremonious, so fleeting, and yet taking something of you with him.

What is it? What does he take; it's something you never wanted – something you wanted to be saved from – and it's gone. He's gone with it. What did he take?

During Holy Week, please stay with this question. I pray that you will see what's gone, and what possibilities its passing opens up for you. Amen.