

Palm Sunday-Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem

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Outside: introduction to the liturgy of the Palms

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

The soldiers will watch everything from their battlements. I don't think they'll believe it's an insurrection – these aren't insurgents. More likely they'll think there's a factional battle brewing between different groups of religious fanatics.

And the Temple authorities will be watching too, trying to measure the threat; preparing strategies to quench a dangerous new movement. If they don't stop it quickly, there'll be soldiers out on the Temple Mount imposing martial law before you know it. You can sympathise with all of them really; that is, until you think about the decisions some of them took.

The Palm Sunday Gospel calls us to join the crowd of people who surround Jesus, and to choose to walk with him. So let's do that. Let's raise our palm crosses, bless them together, and then hear the palm Gospel.

Sermon – The servant king who conquers through self-emptying, not force.

The crowds on the Mount of Olives were crying out words from

Psalm 118. : ^{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. We bless you from the house of the Lord.* ²⁷ *The Lord is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar.*

Everyone who was anyone has come to Jerusalem to conquer her, to control her, to rescue her, to avenge her. Jesus came to save them by emptying himself of power.

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 Chr 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 conquered the land (332 BCE)

Julius Caesar's general **Pompey** (63 BCE) and **Caesar** 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 the 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)

Lots of them believed they were joining a mission to save Jerusalem from blasphemy and evil. Yet they came to do that with swords or guns or bombs.

Today, we accompany another king who rode into Jerusalem. We join a crowd of ordinary people who line the road down the Mount of Olives to shout with hope and joy – hope for a king who'll lead an army. But we get Jesus, perched on the back of a tiny donkey that jiggles its unceremonious way down towards Jerusalem. We're shouting; we're crying out to him to save us. We're bellowing **הוֹשַׁנָּה הוֹשַׁנָּה** – Hosanna 'save us, we beseech you' – the cry of suffering people – we're crying out to this very exposed man on a borrowed donkey; calling *him* to save us.

The generals, sultans, caliphs, kings, emperors and armies have arrived to turn people into enemies, captives, slaves, subjects, displaced persons and refugees. They've taken by force what isn't theirs to take. Jesus doesn't do that; he's an utterly different king. He receives what isn't his too, but rather than taking over people's freedom, he receives from us what hurts and terrifies and imprisons us.

- Remember that costly perfume the woman anointed him with? Jesus received her gift as an acknowledgement of his burial.
- Jesus received Judas's twisted friendship for him
- He received the animosity of the chief priests and the cowardice of Pilate
- He received Barabbas's execution
- He received the crowd's capricious change; '*hosanna*' one day, '*crucify*' the next
- He received the soldiers' boredom, their mocking and

their cruelty

- He received Simon of Cyrene's forced assistance
- He received acknowledgment of his kingship with the sarcastic inscription on his cross
- He received the contempt of passers by, of priests and scribes, and of one of the criminals crucified with him
- And in death, he received the centurion's confession of belief.

Somehow, by his self-emptying, Jesus makes space within himself to receive the gifts and sufferings of others. By his self-emptying, he opens himself to receive the good and the bad. And in receiving them, he transforms the life of the people to whom he shows such compassion.

No-one can be just a bystander watching Jesus pass by. He will receive something from us – respect, indignation, shame, dishonour, authority, disbelief – and we'll find the place where it was in us may well be utterly transformed.

If we choose him as our teacher – if we choose discipleship to Jesus – to follow him – then on this Passion Sunday we need to know that his is the path of compassion. And compassion, as our Lenten study group has been learning, quite literally means suffering with the other – the one who hurts. The terrible challenge of the Holy Week journey we embark on today is this; as followers of Jesus, are we also prepared to travel the road of self-emptying? To renounce the power and influence we might habitually use to serve the ends of ourselves, our friends and families? To enter the world of those who are hurting, and be with these dear ones in their pain?

Jesus doesn't ask this of the ones who are already suffering – he doesn't need to; you already know compassion. But he does ask it of the comfortable and the contented – and he asks it not so much individuals as communities.

So St John's, are we prepared to stay on this path? Are we

still prepared to self-empty; to risk; to receive what only the compassionate dare to receive, and to trust in our Lord that this will lead to healing?