

# PALM SUNDAY SERMON 2020

Our lectionary readings today link closely to one another.

**The Old Testament** book of Zechariah foretells Christ's coming in lowliness (6:12), his betrayal for 30 pieces of silver (11:12-13), his crucifixion (13:7) and the nature of his kingdom. Today's reading (**Zechariah 9: 9-10**) points us to Jesus' kingship. We are told to rejoice because the promised king will be righteous and victorious when he comes. He will be lowly and riding on a donkey. He will break the battle bow, proclaim peace to the nations and his rule will extend to the ends of the earth. What is astonishing is not that these words came true in the person of Jesus; but that they were written down some 500 years before the events they describe.

**In our Gospel reading (Matthew 21:1-11)** these prophecies are fulfilled as Jesus, travelling from the Mount of Olives enters the city gate. Although Jesus had been to Jerusalem several times, this is his final entry into the city. The account has many layers of meaning. Let us consider five pieces of symbolism in today's reading:

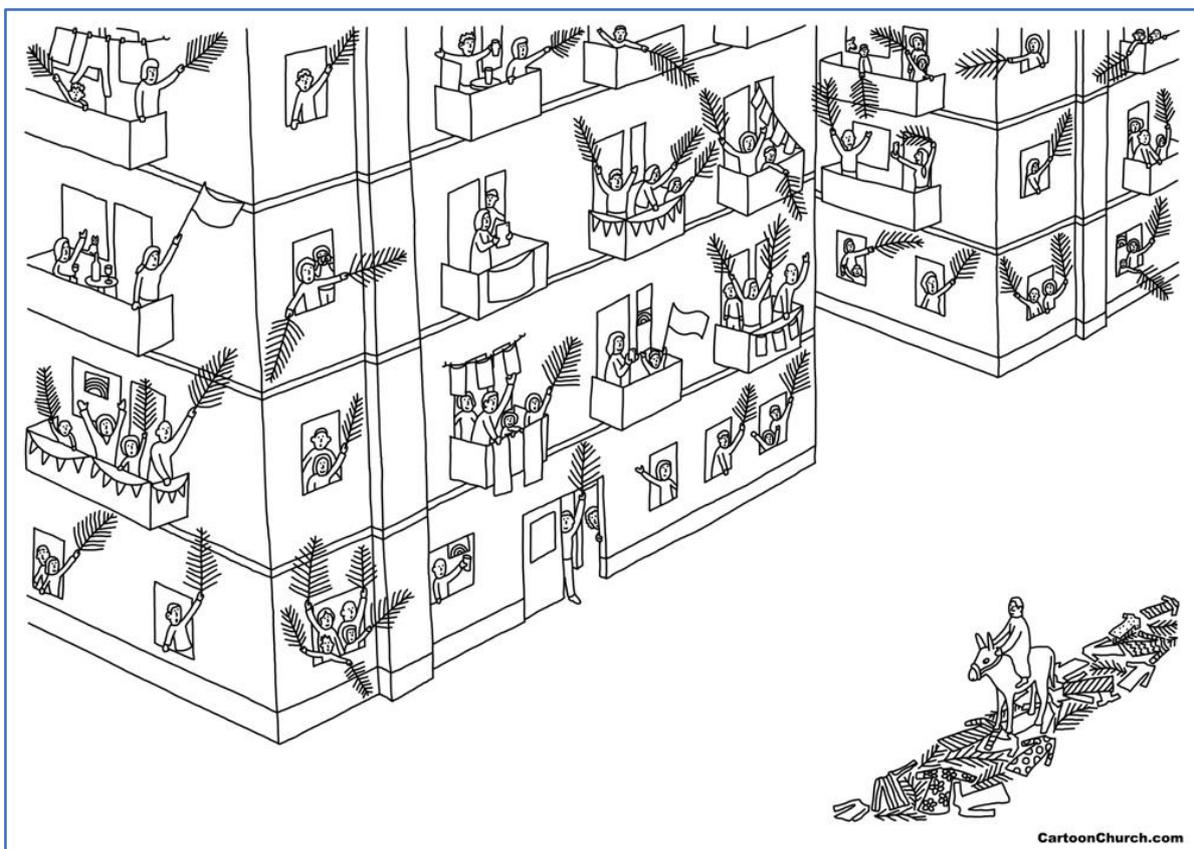
- **His route of travel** matched the traditional route from Bethphage into the city from which the Paschal Lamb was brought for the Passover sacrifice. The point of entry is called the Golden Gate by Christians. In Jewish belief the gate, is called 'The Gate of Mercy' (sha'ar harakhamim), and is according to Ezekiel 44, the place from which the Messiah will enter the Holy City at the end of days.
- **The timing of his journey** is also of significance. This is five days before Jesus' death. Traditionally, it is five days before the Passover that the lamb to be sacrificed is separated from the flock. Jesus enters Jerusalem to offer himself as a one-time sacrifice for us all, five days before the dreadful events at Golgotha.
- **The manner of his arrival.** Although a long-promised King, Jesus enters the city on a donkey. This symbolizes an arrival in peace, rather than that of a war-waging king who would have arrived on a horse with much pomp and fanfare. This king was to rule over a new era and offer a new type of reign.
- **His choice of transport.** Jesus arrives on a lowly creature used for service and to bear burdens. This is a creature that is safe and constantly sure-footed. Both donkey and rider embody meekness, gentleness and a life given in the service of others.
- **The crowd's words and actions.** Despite his humble arrival Jesus is greeted by adoring crowds shouting "Hosanna!" This means "God saves" and recalls the shouts of joy and victory from Psalm 118: 25-26. The crowd recognise Jesus as Messiah. Their laying of cloaks and palm leaves offer a pathway to honour the new king. This is the biblical equivalent of a red carpet. Verse 10 describes the crowd as being "stirred." In other translation this word is "moved" (KJV) or "agitated and trembling with excitement." (Amplified Bible). In the original language this word was the same used to describe the impact of an earthquake.

We can see that the scenes on Palm Sunday have many layers of meaning. However, there is one aspect I would like to draw our attention to today That is, how do we welcome Jesus into our lives? Are we willing to welcome him publicly and sustain that proclamation? It is easy to make verbal promises to be faithful and then not follow up with actions. It can feel comfortable to proclaim our faith as we worship together in church; but how comfortable are we embodying our faith in other parts of our life? At work? When dealing with people who are hard to like? When faced with tricky choices that require us to do what is right rather than take the easy way out? It is all too easy to turn

our back on faith and 'go with the crowd' doing the popular rather than the right thing. The crowds in Holy Week show us so much about the fickle nature of collective humanity and perhaps invite us to hold a mirror to our own choices and behaviours.

It is not lost on me that during Holy Week this year there will be no crowds. On Palm Sunday there will be no parades with palms, no enthusiastic communal singing of hymns or the annual ritual of positioning of a new palm cross at home in place of the desiccating and dusty one from last year.

The cartoon below is part of a series of pieces of contemporary artwork by Dave Walker. Like the bible reading it has many layers of meaning and levels of detail to contemplate. I invite you to study the picture and find within it yourself and the people that you know. Whilst there is joy, not all the faces are happy. Some look scared and others worried. My eyes teared when I found the rainbows in the windows and the children barely able to see over their balconies. The couples in the image reminded me of my own parents, missing their children and grandchildren as they shield themselves from the current emergency. I am also haunted by how Jesus himself looks here. He comes this Holy Week to save us all, but this year's greeting is in a very different context. I wonder what welcome lays beyond the frame of the picture?



Source: <http://cartoonchurch.com/thumbnail-view/>.

I invite you afresh to consider how the story of Palm Sunday told in scripture relates to your life and that of your family and friends. We are living amid a pandemic with implications almost too awful to contemplate. As Christians we are at the start of Holy Week during which we will as a worldwide church contemplate the darkest parts of the world and the bright hope that we have in the person of Jesus Christ. He offers us a hope and peace that is beyond all understanding.

Let us rest in and be sustained by that sure and certain hope, this day and always.

**Amen.**

Rev'd Lisa Cornell. Yalding, Laddingford and Collier St. 5<sup>th</sup> April 2020.