

Palm Sunday 2021*'Hail the King!'*

by Rev. Robert Griffith

On a humid August day just under 85 years ago, a crowd gathered to commence what was to be an unparalleled event for its time. Hundreds of thousands of spectators, police officers, and soldiers gathered for an event so spectacular, so colossal, it almost seemed to come out of a fairy tale rather than real life. Six continents and 49 countries were represented, with most guests, especially the athletes wearing clothing with their own home flag represented, either on their person, or as they waved their flag for the crowd to see.

But the most obvious flag, the most conspicuous flag that day, was by far, the Swastika. It was draped anywhere and everywhere there was room. For this was the 1936 Olympics, hosted in Berlin. And while most of the athletes were present, the main attraction that day was not the athletes who would compete for medals, but the one who would preside over them, Adolf Hitler.

At 3:18 p.m. Adolf Hitler left the chancellery in central Berlin, standing upright in his Mercedes limousine, his right arm lifted in the Nazi salute. Tens of thousands of Hitler Youth, storm troopers, and helmeted military guards lined his route from the Brandenburg Gate through the Tiergarten and out to the Reichssportfeld. Hundreds of thousands of ordinary German citizens had massed along the way, leaning from windows and waving flags or standing twelve or more deep along the street, again using periscopes to get a glimpse of Hitler.

Now, as his limousine passed, they extended their right arms in the Nazi salute, their faces upturned, ecstatic, screaming in pulsing waves as he rode by, "*Heil! Heil! Heil!*" At the stadium, where all the Olympic team members stood, the athletes began to hear the distant sound of crowds cheering, the noise slowly swelling and growing closer, then loudspeakers began blaring, "*He is coming! He is coming! He is Coming!*" Chilling words aren't they? Not just because we know what Hitler's leadership would bring to the world, but also, the messianic overtones that we hear in the shouts of Hail! Most of those people who shouted 'hail' that day didn't know the real Adolf Hitler.

I could not help but compare and contrast this scene to the day we celebrate as Palm Sunday... the day Jesus entered Jerusalem, not standing in a Mercedes, or even the ancient world's equivalent, the chariot, but rather he came on a donkey. He came not to conquer other humans, He came to serve, to save, to redeem. He came to die for those who mocked him, abused Him and murdered Him only days later. Most of those people who shouted 'hail' that day, didn't know the real Jesus Christ.

On this day around the world, hundreds of millions of Christians celebrate what we have called Palm Sunday. You know the story - it's a little bizarre actually. This was the day when Jesus needed to get into Jerusalem, so He told His disciples to go grab Him a donkey. That's ok. Maybe people borrowed donkeys a lot back then. But it's what happened next that seems so irrational to me.

Let's read Matthew's account of that first Palm Sunday procession, from chapter 21 of his gospel.

Matthew 21:1-11 “As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away.”

This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: “Say to Daughter Zion, ‘See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’”

The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,

“Hosanna to the Son of David!”

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, “Who is this?”

The crowds answered, “This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.”

People came from around Jerusalem to see Jesus ride in, but they didn't just watch. They began cutting branches off nearby trees to wave and also to create a carpet for Jesus and the donkey. They started taking their robes off and lining the ground for Jesus to ride on them instead of the dirt. Why? Didn't they care they were defacing the beauty of the trees lining the road? Didn't they care they were ruining their clothes? Didn't they care about their own modesty? How could they be so foolish and wasteful?

Palm Sunday is completely irrational. It's also incredibly beautiful. There is no rational reason why the crowd was moved to this frenzied pitch. It was supernatural. There was a recognition that inspired irrationally generous worship. They knew they were in the presence of something greater than themselves. They didn't see a man riding a donkey. They saw their Messiah, who was about to change human history, riding an animal of peace.

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True love is irrationally generous. It gives. It gives more. It gives until the point of sacrifice. True worship is always an expression of love and generosity. The people watching Jesus were supernaturally aware that God Himself was among them in the form of their Messiah. They recognized their own shortcomings, shouting “hosanna,” which originally meant, “Lord, save us now.” They gave whatever they could get their hands on - including their own clothes - because they thought it would honour Jesus. Because, when you're in God's presence, everything on you, around you, and in you becomes something you want to use to worship Him.

So that's the key, isn't it? Allow God to reveal Himself to you, and respond in the moment! Of course only days later the next crowd that gathered around this same Jesus worked themselves into another completely irrational frenzy. But this one wasn't beautifully irrational. This crowd demanded Jesus be killed. They cried out for him to be crucified. They couldn't see Him as their peaceful saviour. They could only see their own jealousy and hate. The crowd was clueless. They never got it right.

They shouted praises. He wept. They looked for a warrior-king riding a white stallion. They got a carpenter riding a donkey. They wanted hype. They got a healer. They wanted a prophet. They got One who fulfilled prophecy. They wanted a sword-wielding conqueror. They got a submissive Saviour. They got nothing they asked for but everything they needed. They were clueless. Jesus was the only One there who really knew what was happening on that first Palm Sunday.

It's so easy to become like those people in Jerusalem. We think we know what's going on, but we really don't have a clue. We have a bad week, and we blame God. Our kids act out, and we blame the school. We work two jobs and wonder why things aren't better at home. Jesus comes into our world and He wants to help but we don't recognize Him for who He is. We think He will be impressed with our earthly lives and mansions and achievements. He is not. He just wants our hearts. That's what Palm Sunday is all about.

Yet I wonder if there is a more conflicted day in the church year than Palm Sunday? My memories of these worship services growing up don't tend to attend to this complexity. I remember palm branches and singing 'Hosanna' guitar choruses and that's about it. But as I reflect on this day now, I see it as a day of getting it, losing it and realising we never had it.

Palm Sunday cannot be a simple celebration of Jesus as Lord, or more accurately, our recognition of Jesus as Lord. Because we know what comes next in the story. This crowd that welcomes Jesus as the Messiah is the same crowd that Jesus somehow disappoints with His refusal to lead them to the kind of freedom or victory they had imagined, and then they complete their betrayal with their cries of 'Crucify! Crucify!' before Pilate.

I think Palm Sunday is more nuanced and rich than we have perhaps allowed it to be. It is a clear acknowledgement of Jesus' lordship, but not in the way we imagined, or not even in the way we currently conceive. It might be that Palm Sunday gives us permission to greet Jesus Whose lordship is still beyond us, who still refuses to fill the part in the drama we have scripted for Him. In welcoming this Jesus we acknowledge that we have got it right in calling Him Messiah, but that we have undoubtedly got it wrong if we think we know precisely what His salvation will look like.

On Palm Sunday we need space to welcome Jesus as Messiah. We also need space to confess that we may have been praying and longing for the wrong kind of Saviour. We need room to own up to the fact that we are changeable and fickle, that we can be shallow, thoughtless and vindictive, that when we are hurt and disappointed we can do terrible things. Yet the glory of Palm Sunday is that Jesus knows this about us and weeps with compassion over this as he longs to gather us in and protect us – probably from ourselves. Jesus knows this about us and still receives our welcome – even though he knows it is merely the prequel to our vitriol and violence. In the light of Jesus' forgiveness towards his accusers and killers – we realise that though we too have found ourselves on the wrong side of this drama; we have it in us to be treacherous, and yet we are loved.

Palm Sunday is a deep and rich moment in the church year. It gives room for beautiful yet broken humanity; the 'getting it, losing it, never really had it, but loved all the same' people. That's who we are. But I also hope this Palm Sunday lifts your eyes and your hearts to the horizon. Palm Sunday reminds us of the day when Jesus fulfilled that Old Testament prophecy of Zechariah and the worshippers who lined the road and praised the Messiah were shouting the words of the Psalmist: "*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!*" (Psalm 118:26)

Each Palm Sunday we celebrate takes us one year closer to the next time our King is coming. This time he will not be riding on a donkey and submitting to torture and death. This time will be come on a white stallion to bring everything to completion. As foreseen by John in his revelation on the Island of Patmos.

The king has come . . . to secure our salvation and in this Easter week we will remember what it cost Him to bring us from the kingdom of darkness and death into the kingdom of light and life. But that same King is coming again at the end of the ages as the final conqueror of sin and death and on that beautiful, terrible day . . . the fullness of the Kingdom of our Lord will be revealed.

So there is a past and future perspective for us to embrace today on this Palm Sunday. We look back to that day when the last week of Jesus' life on earth began with his procession into Jerusalem as thousands cried 'Hosanna' on Sunday . . . only to cry 'Crucify him' less than a week later. We also look to the horizon and long for the day when Jesus comes again at the end of this age and brings His mission to conclusion and ushers in the fullness of His kingdom.

But I want to encourage us also to embrace the present reality of Palm Sunday today. Just as we can see Jesus entering Jerusalem all those years ago and get caught up in that praise and worship; and just as we can focus on that future coming of the Lord when everything God has promised and we have longed for comes to pass – we can also welcome the coming King today into our hearts, our lives, our workplaces, our families, our communities and, dare I suggest such a thing, we can welcome Him into our Church. For Jesus is always 'the God Who saves us' and He is always worthy of our worship. Every day of our lives we have an opportunity to turn to Jesus and see our broken lives made new and find strength to face the day before us in His presence, by His grace and for His glory.

So on this Palm Sunday, let us all worship the King Who is mighty to save and present in our lives today and may the Holy Spirit prepare our hearts to embrace another Good Friday and Easter Sunday soon as we mourn, reflect, celebrate and worship the Lamb Who was slain, the Saviour Who conquered our enemies by submitting to death and may this truly be a 'holy week' in more than name only. Amen.