

Palm (Passion) Sunday

Year A

Colour red

Palm Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week and reminds us of the events at the end of Jesus' life in which he was welcomed into Jerusalem, ate a last meal with his disciples, was betrayed to the authorities by one of his friends, interrogated, convicted and sentenced to death by crucifixion. After his crucifixion he was buried. On the third day after his crucifixion he rose from the dead. His followers found his tomb empty and Jesus appeared to his disciples to show them what had happened and that God's promises are true. In Holy Week, leading up to Easter Day when the resurrection of Jesus is celebrated, the Church rehearses these last days of Jesus' remembering what he did, the tasks he gave his disciples and his words about the goodness and mercy of God.

Matthew 21.1-11

Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them." And he will send them immediately.'

This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying, 'Tell the daughter of Zion,

Look, your king is coming to you,

humble, and mounted on a donkey,

and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'

The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

'Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?' The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.'

What's going on?

This reading and the one which follows may be used in the procession of palms on Palm Sunday. Many churches have some form of re-enactment of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. People are given palm leaves (usually dry, single fronds) which may be blessed with Holy Water by the priest or minister. There may be readings and a 'walk of witness' into the Church to bring to mind that today remembers Jesus' journey into the city of Jerusalem.

Jesus entry into Jerusalem is a powerful symbolic action. He was coming into the Holy City at the time of Passover, the major Jewish festival remembering God's actions towards the Jewish people when God spared those who were faithful in a time of death and calamity, understood as God's angel of death 'passing over' the chosen Jewish people. There was a great deal going on in Jerusalem at the time, and the great festivals were times of tension when the people often felt aggrieved against the Roman occupying authorities. The people were looking for a leader, a champion, and particularly perhaps, a warrior king who would free them from the Romans and re-establish their territory, religion and culture under their own rule. So many people had great expectations of Jesus.

Matthew's gospel tells us what Jesus did. Instead of riding into the city in a show of power and challenge, he does something rather strange, asking the disciples to bring him a donkey. He uses the humble donkey to ride into the city, not as a warrior king but as an ordinary traveller with no special power. Matthew also sees in this action an Old Testament reference to God's servant and argues that Jesus, knowing this passage, rode into Jerusalem in this way to make the prophet's words come to life. The crowd responds anyway, treating Jesus like royalty and giving him a hero's welcome. It is

clear from this passage that everyone who saw and heard about Jesus' arrival expected something amazing to happen.

Psalm 118

A Song of Victory

**O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his steadfast love endures for ever!**

**Let Israel say,
'His steadfast love endures for ever.'
Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the LORD.**

**This is the gate of the LORD;
the righteous shall enter through it.**

**I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.**

**The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.**

**This is the LORD's doing;
it is marvellous in our eyes.**

**This is the day that the LORD has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.**

**Save us, we beseech you, O LORD!
O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!**

**Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD.
We bless you from the house of the LORD.**

**The LORD is God,
and he has given us light.**

**Bind the festal procession with branches,
up to the horns of the altar.**

**You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;
you are my God, I will extol you.**

**O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures for ever.**

What's going on?

This psalm was written to be sung before the gates of the Temple (hence the reference to opening) and to be sung in a time of victory over Israel's enemies as the people come to give thanks to God. So the psalm is part of a victory celebration in which God's help and protection are acknowledged and celebrated. This psalm echoes what was in the people's minds when Jesus came to Jerusalem. The people saw him as bringing victory, entering the gates of the City and celebrated him in the words of this psalm 'blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord'

Isaiah 50.4-9a

The Servant's Humiliation and Vindication

**The Lord God has given me
the tongue of a teacher,
that I may know how to sustain
the weary with a word.**

**Morning by morning he wakens—
wakens my ear
to listen as those who are taught.**

**The Lord God has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious,**

**I did not turn backwards.
I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face
from insult and spitting.**

**The Lord God helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;
he who vindicates me is near.**

**Who will contend with me?
Let us stand up together.**

**Who are my adversaries?
Let them confront me.**

**It is the Lord God who helps me;
who will declare me guilty?
All of them will wear out like a garment;
the moth will eat them up.**

What's going on?

This passage in Isaiah tells us that God's true servant must suffer as part of his servanthood. There will be humiliation, pain, insults at the hands of human beings. God's servant has to endure all these things but also keep in his heart the knowledge that God has a plan which will come to fruition through him. In the end God's true servant will be vindicated; his task is to stand firm. This prophetic writing was part of Jesus' scriptural background and must have played a part in confirming for him what was to happen in Jerusalem.

Psalm 118, 1-2; 19-29

**Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress;
my eye wastes away from grief,
my soul and body also.**

**For my life is spent with sorrow,
and my years with sighing;
my strength fails because of my misery,
and my bones waste away.**

**I am the scorn of all my adversaries,
a horror to my neighbours,
an object of dread to my acquaintances;
those who see me in the street flee from me.
I have passed out of mind like one who is dead;
I have become like a broken vessel.
For I hear the whispering of many—
terror all around!—
as they scheme together against me,
as they plot to take my life.**

**But I trust in you, O LORD;
I say, 'You are my God.'
My times are in your hand;
deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.
Let your face shine upon your servant;
save me in your steadfast love.**

What's going on?

This psalm reiterates the message we heard in Isaiah. The faithful servant of the Lord suffers and is filled with misery. All around him is hostility and he fears he will die. What can you do if you are sunk this low? The answer is to trust in God and believe absolutely that God is faithful to his promises and you will be saved.

Philippians 2.5-11

**Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.**

**Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.**

What's going on?

This letter to the people of Philippi makes the same point again about what Jesus did. Although he was the Son of God, he did not use his power to overcome people or to wage war. Instead he did the opposite, becoming like a slave and going to his death because God asked it of him. Because of his obedience and faithfulness to God's purposes, God exalted him, and Jesus overcame human death by rising from the dead. Because both God and Jesus, as God's Son, were faithful, God's plan of salvation became accessible to every human person. So we should all give thanks and be grateful for what Jesus did.

Matthew 26.14-27.66

Judas Agrees to Betray Jesus

Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests and said, 'What will you give me if I betray him to you?' They paid him thirty pieces of silver. And from that moment he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

The Passover with the Disciples

On the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, 'Where do you want us to make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?' He said, 'Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, "The Teacher says, My time is near; I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples." ' So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover meal.

When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve; and while they were eating, he said, 'Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.' And they became greatly distressed and began to say to him one after another, 'Surely not I, Lord?' He answered, 'The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.' Judas, who betrayed him, said, 'Surely not I, Rabbi?' He replied, 'You have said so.'

The Institution of the Lord's Supper

While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.'

When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Peter's Denial Foretold

Then Jesus said to them, 'You will all become deserters because of me this night; for it is written,

"I will strike the shepherd,
and the sheep of the flock will be scattered."

But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.' Peter said to him, 'Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you.' Jesus said to him, 'Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.' Peter said to him, 'Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.' And so said all the disciples.

Jesus Prays in Gethsemane

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I go over there and pray.' He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.' And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.' Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, 'So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.' Again he went away for the second time and prayed, 'My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.' Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words. Then he came to the disciples and said to them, 'Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.'

The Betrayal and Arrest of Jesus

While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived; with him was a large crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, 'The one I

will kiss is the man; arrest him.' At once he came up to Jesus and said, 'Greetings, Rabbi!' and kissed him. Jesus said to him, 'Friend, do what you are here to do.' Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and arrested him. Suddenly, one of those with Jesus put his hand on his sword, drew it, and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, 'Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?' At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, 'Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I were a bandit? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not arrest me. But all this has taken place, so that the scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled.' Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.

Jesus before the High Priest

Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas the high priest, in whose house the scribes and the elders had gathered. But Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest; and going inside, he sat with the guards in order to see how this would end. Now the chief priests and the whole council were looking for false testimony against Jesus so that they might put him to death, but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward and said, 'This fellow said, "I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days." ' The high priest stood up and said, 'Have you no answer? What is it that they testify against you?' But Jesus was silent. Then the high priest said to him, 'I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God.' Jesus said to him, 'You have said so. But I tell you,

From now on you will see the Son of Man
seated at the right hand of Power
and coming on the clouds of heaven.'

Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, 'He has blasphemed! Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy. What is your verdict?' They answered, 'He deserves death.' Then they spat in his face and struck him; and some slapped him, saying, 'Prophecy to us, you Messiah! Who is it that struck you?'

Peter's Denial of Jesus

Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. A servant-girl came to him and said, 'You also were with Jesus the Galilean.' But he denied it before all of them, saying, 'I do not know what you are talking about.' When he went out to the porch, another servant-girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, 'This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.' Again he denied it with an oath, 'I do not know the man.' After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, 'Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you.' Then he began to curse, and he swore an oath, 'I do not know the man!' At that moment the cock crowed. Then Peter remembered what Jesus had said: 'Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.' And he went out and wept bitterly.

Jesus Brought before Pilate

When morning came, all the chief priests and the elders of the people conferred together against Jesus in order to bring about his death. They bound him, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate the governor.

The Suicide of Judas

When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. He said, 'I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.' But they said, 'What is that to us? See to it yourself.' Throwing down the pieces of silver in the temple, he departed; and he went and hanged himself. But the chief priests, taking the pieces of silver, said, 'It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, since they are blood money.' After conferring together, they used them to buy the potter's field as a place to bury foreigners. For this reason that field has been called the Field of Blood to this day. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, 'And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the one on whom a price had been set, on whom some of the people of Israel had set a price, and they gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord commanded me.'

Pilate Questions Jesus

Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus said, 'You say so.' But when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he did not answer. Then Pilate said to him, 'Do you not hear how many accusations they make against you?' But he gave him no answer, not even to a single charge, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

Barabbas or Jesus?

Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. At that time they had a notorious prisoner, called Jesus Barabbas. So after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, 'Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?' For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over. While he was sitting on the judgement seat, his wife sent word to him, 'Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.' Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus killed. The governor again said to them, 'Which of the two do you want me to release for you?' And they said, 'Barabbas.' Pilate said to them, 'Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?' All of them said, 'Let him be crucified!' Then he asked, 'Why, what evil has he done?' But they shouted all the more, 'Let him be crucified!'

Pilate Hands Jesus over to Be Crucified

So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, 'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.' Then the people as a whole answered, 'His blood be on us and on our children!' So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified.

The Soldiers Mock Jesus

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

The Crucifixion of Jesus

As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross. And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; then they sat down there and kept watch over him. Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, 'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.'

Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, 'You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.' In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, "I am God's Son." ' The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.

The Death of Jesus

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, 'This man is calling for Elijah.' At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, 'Wait, let

us see whether Elijah will come to save him.' Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'

Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

The Burial of Jesus

When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.

The Guard at the Tomb

The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, 'Sir, we remember what that impostor said while he was still alive, "After three days I will rise again." Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day; otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell the people, "He has been raised from the dead", and the last deception would be worse than the first.' Pilate said to them, 'You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can.' So they went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone.

What's going on?

The Gospel on Palm Sunday is always a really long one because it tells the whole story of Jesus' last days in one go. The reason for this is to set the context in words for the celebration of the various events later in Holy Week and leading into Easter Day. This gives us a chance to think about the extraordinary story and begin to reflect on it, as we pass through the remembrance of the Last Supper on Maundy Thursday, the remembrance of Jesus' death on Good Friday, the vigil for Jesus' death and burial on Holy Saturday and the celebration of Jesus' resurrection on Easter Sunday.

There are two versions of the story which may be used. The first, set out above, goes from the betrayal by Judas to Jesus' burial. The second, shorter version, concentrates on Jesus' trial up to his death on the cross.

The sequence of events is as follows: the Jewish authorities disliked Jesus and believed he was going to stir up trouble for them, especially with the crowds expecting a Messiah to overturn the existing order of things. The Jewish authorities who had been troubled by Jesus' teaching and healing throughout his ministry, wanted to get rid of him. One of Jesus' followers, Judas, was persuaded to set him up, so that he could be arrested and was paid for doing so.

Against this background of unrest and intrigue, we see Jesus eating the Passover meal with his disciples. It turns out that he knows what Judas has done and what it means for him, but he does nothing to stop it: events must take their course. But because Jesus knows his time in Jerusalem will end with his death, time is short and he must give his disciples their last instructions. Accordingly Jesus turns the acts of eating and drinking at the Passover into a new ritual which will allow the disciples to remember him and bring him to be present with them when he is no longer with them. He gives them specific actions and specific words to say and these words and actions form the basis of every celebration in the Christian church of the Eucharist (Mass or Lord's Supper).

Once this is done, Jesus goes out to pray, telling the disciples that they will end up being scattered and he will be alone. All of them promise to stay with him, but he says he knows that fear and bewilderment will make them

deny him and run away, even Peter. Jesus is very upset but will not try to change the Father's will. Although he would like things to be different he stays obedient to God. After he has made up his mind to do as the Father wishes, Judas appears and reveals him to the authorities. Jesus is arrested and taken away. There is a short fight, which Jesus stops and then he heals an injured man. The disciples, as he predicted, run away although Peter follows at a distance to see what happens.

Jesus is taken before the Jewish High Priest who interrogates him trying to find an excuse to have him put to death. They are looking for a religious transgression so serious (eg blasphemy) that they can argue for Jesus' death. The Jewish authorities need to go about this in a certain way because there are rules about what can and cannot be done during Passover. Having decided Jesus must be put to death, they abuse him.

The story then shifts slightly to fill in other parts of the event. Peter, as Jesus said, denies he had anything to do with Jesus. He is too scared to own up to being a follower. When he remembers that Jesus knew he would do this, he weeps. As the death sentence is passed by the High Priest and Jesus is taken to Pilate the Roman governor, Judas, realising that what he has done has led to Jesus being condemned to death, kills himself.

The next part of the story deals with Jesus' conversations with the Roman Governor. Pilate hears the accusations but Jesus says nothing to defend himself. Pilate then offers the people a choice of two convicted persons, one of whom can be saved, but the people, incited by the Jewish authorities choose Barabbas instead of Jesus. Matthew suggests that Pilate is still unhappy about the way Jesus has been treated and includes a story about Pilate's wife telling Pilate that Jesus is innocent. Pilate, aware of the different vested interests and the hostility towards Jesus symbolically washes his hands of his own part in what happens to him.

After this, Jesus is taken away by guards and mocked and humiliated. Because he was convicted for being 'King of the Jews', they parody this by dressing him up as a king and giving him a crown of thorns. Then Jesus is taken out and crucified on a cross outside the city, where the mockery continues and a notice about his crime 'this is the King of the Jews' is put up.

Jesus calls in a despairing cry of abandon to God and dies. His death is accompanied by an earthquake, darkness, graves splitting open and damage to the Temple which frighten and terrify many. Some Roman guards however, see Jesus for who he really is. Some of his family and friends are also present.

One of Jesus' followers, Joseph of Arimathea, asks Pilate for permission to bury Jesus and so the body is taken from the cross, prepared for burial and placed in a rock tomb with a stone covering the entrance. The family remain in attendance, witnesses to the fact that Jesus was really dead and really buried. Matthew then adds to this by saying that as Jesus had prophesied his resurrection, the Pharisees asked for measures to be taken to make sure no one could say that he had come back from the dead. Accordingly, he tells us, the tomb was made especially secure and guards mounted around it. As far as the Jewish authorities were concerned, that was the end of Jesus and his movement. He was not coming back.