

**Sermon**

Sunday 28 March 2021  
Palm Sunday

Lesson

St Mark 11: 1 – 11

Today is Palm Sunday. We remember and celebrate the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. If you had been in Jerusalem, in the holy city, on that day, what might you have seen? Jerusalem, the City of David, sits on a high plain or plateau surrounded by valleys. In the time of Jesus, forests of almond, olive and pine trees were all around. Picture it: under the scorching heat of the Mediterranean sun the triumphant procession weaved its way through the vast, cheering crowds. If you were in Jerusalem that day, if you saw the procession, *the* procession, what would you have seen?

Perhaps, ‘a panoply of imperial power’; a splendid display of ‘cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armour, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold.’

What would you have heard? ‘The marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums.’ In your eyes, will you have felt the ‘swirling of dust’? If you were in Jerusalem on

that day, on the day of the procession, *the* procession, that surely is what you would have seen. If you were asked by a visitor who had arrived late, that surely is the description you would have given.

You see, on the day we call Palm Sunday, the day on which we remember and celebrate the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, into the *City of Shalem*, there was in fact another procession, a truly grand and triumphal entry. It was the beginning of the week of the Jewish festival of Passover. Many thousands of people, Jews and Gentiles, had journeyed from all corners of the Roman empire: Jerusalem was buzzing. In order to reinforce the garrison, the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, had made his way from the coast, from Caesarea Maritima, the provincial capital of Roman Judea, to take up residence in Jerusalem. He brought with him thousands of soldiers. Pilate was welcomed into the city through the west gate.

On the opposite side of the city, along the road that led through the east gate, Jesus came with His disciples. I daresay that Jesus and His disciples will almost certainly have heard the cheers of the Jerusalem

crowds in the distance. The details in the story of Jesus making His way to Jerusalem are full of symbolism. With His disciples, He reached the town of Bethany and passed by the Mount of Olives. To the early Christian community, the name 'Bethany' was suggestive of resurrection: it was the home of Lazarus. In ancient Jewish prophecy, it was believed that God would appear, break into history and stand on the Mount of Olives, and from there defeat the nations that oppressed Israel. For the early Christian community, God had appeared, had broken into history, and was seen in Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus rode into the city on a colt. From the Old Testament, the colt is a symbol of kingship and so too the garments, the cloaks, that were laid down to carpet the road. The disciples sang, 'Blessed is the kingdom of our father David.' Jesus was being hailed as the Davidic Messiah, the new 'King David'. The contrast between Pilate and Jesus, governor and messiah, could not be starker.

Pontius Pilate represented the Emperor. Since the days of Augustus, the Emperor was believed to be divine: he was said to be 'the son of

God, the Lord and Saviour'. The Roman Emperor brought peace on earth. Augustus had been fathered by the god Apollo and, on death, he ascended into heaven to take his permanent seat among the gods. The day on which the Roman Governor processed from the west into Jerusalem displaying the might and theology of Rome Jesus rode into Jerusalem from the east on a colt. Jesus stage-managed His entry. Jesus entered the city as the son of David: the justice of God's Kingdom was on display.

For me, the Christian faith is an invitation to journey ever more deeply into the Mystery of God. It calls for a continual change of heart: a repentance, a return to God. As we open ourselves more fully to the Presence and Silence of the Eternal, the more we will reflect the light of God in our lives and, in ways we cannot know, change the world around us. For me, one way of interpreting the story of two triumphal entries into Jerusalem is to see that, within the human heart, we find both Pilate and Christ. At times, we are drawn to the seductions of the world, such as power, wealth, status and self-interest. At times, we are drawn to the beauty of God's world, such

as self-sacrifice, humility, peacefulness and tender compassion. The triumphal entries are not historical events of two thousand years ago: the horses and the colt run through our souls.

Each of us is called to do what we can on our own spiritual journey, and each of us is invited to change gently the world around us in whatever ways we can. Mark Carney, the former Governor of the Bank of England, tells the story of attending a conference at the Vatican a few years ago. Together with a range of policymakers, business leaders, academics, union leaders and charity workers, the governor was in Rome to discuss the future of the market system. Pope Francis surprised the gathering by joining the conference delegates for lunch. At lunch, he told a parable. The Pope said:

Our meal will be accompanied by wine. Now, wine is many things. It has a bouquet, colour and richness of taste that all complement the food. It has alcohol that can enliven the mind. Wine enriches all our senses.

At the end of the feast, we will have grappa. Grappa is one thing: alcohol. Grappa is wine distilled.

Humanity is many things – passionate, curious, rational, altruistic, creative, self-interested. But the market is one

thing: self-interest. The market is humanity distilled.

Your job is to turn the grappa back into wine, to turn the market back into humanity. This isn't theology. This is reality. This is the truth.

The Palm Cross we carry from the church today is a tangible reminder of the conflict inside each of us. Now, let yourself return to Jerusalem, to that day of processions, and this time let yourself walk beside Jesus. You have entered a quite different world. Amen.