



### Opening Prayer for Palm Sunday

Almighty God,  
whose Son, Jesus Christ, rode triumphantly  
into Jerusalem on the back of a humble donkey,  
as we immerse ourselves in the events of Holy Week,  
in which shouts of 'hosanna' on Palm Sunday  
turned into cries of 'crucify' on Good Friday,  
help us to hear the story of his passion afresh,  
and be changed and transformed by your love,  
which embraces us with open arms on the cross.  
We ask this in Jesus's name. Amen

### 'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

Have you ever witnessed an important person making a spectacular entrance? What struck you most about it?

### Psalm of the Day – Psalm 118:1 – 2, 19 – 29

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.**

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;  
**as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever.**

**Amen**

### Prayers of Renewal

Let us pray:

Jesus told his disciples that if they wanted to follow him,  
they needed to deny themselves,  
and take up their crosses.

God calls us into that same movement  
of dying to sin and rising again with Christ.

In this quiet space for reflection,  
let us bring to God those things in need of renewal:

*Silence is kept for a few moments...*

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;  
**have mercy upon us.**

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;  
**have mercy upon us.**

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;  
**grant us peace.**

God of our journeys and false starts and new beginnings,  
you walk with us all of our days,  
and nothing in life or death or all creation  
can separate us from your love in Jesus Christ.  
Thank you that you forgive us our faults and mistakes,  
share with us in our worries and struggles,  
and lead us onwards into fullness of life.  
We offer these prayers in the name of Jesus. **Amen**

**Reading**     Matthew 21:1 – 11

### **Sermon**

Whether your views on the institution of the monarchy, one thing we can hopefully all agree upon as arrangements are made for May 6th and the coronation of King Charles III, is that much careful planning and attention to detail will be evident on the day. Events like this are packed full of symbolic significance, with meaning attached to every action in the ceremony; nothing is left to chance, and the end results are all intended to reinforce a particular image of not just royalty but of this nation as a whole. An important part of any such mass event, whatever the occasion, is the arrival of the key person, because the way in which we make our entrance speaks volumes. Palm Sunday reminds us of two very different entrances into Jerusalem that were

made at around the same time. They were both carefully crafted to send powerful messages, as we can see by contrasting them:

- The first was by the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. He was in charge of keeping order in Judea, which was no easy task. The narrow streets of Jerusalem were crowded, dark, smelly, and ideal for causing trouble, and there were plenty of people who wanted to make his life as hard work as possible. People hated having to pay tax to Rome, and the Temple authorities could also be pretty troublesome. To add to the tensions that were always present, the festival of Passover saw thousands of pilgrims from all round pack into the city. That is why Pilate and his entourage always came to Jerusalem at this time, to ensure order was kept. They made a point of entering via the main west gate, with rows of soldiers clad in armour and with swords brandished. This was a serious show of power which warned people not to 'mess' with Pontius Pilate if they valued their lives!
- Contrast that with Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem. We do not know if he arranged beforehand to have a colt waiting for him but either way, it was no accident that he chose to arrive into Jerusalem on a donkey, as the prophet Zechariah had talked about. It was also no coincidence that he chose the east gate of the city as his entrance point, because the prophet Ezekiel had said that was the gate through which the Messiah would come into Jerusalem. The crowd with him, and at least some of those already inside the city, registered the significance of what he was doing, and responded by spreading their cloaks on the floor in front of him as he rode along, whilst others laid down or waved palm branches. This reminded them of David and the messianic hope that had come to be associated with him, and so they all shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David!", and "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!",

echoing the Psalm we heard earlier. In other words, this was designed to demonstrate something special was happening, and that God was at last coming to set the people free.

So, one of the two entrances into Jerusalem was intended to inspire fear and so to keep the population in line, whilst the other was about love and a hope of new beginnings. The *Pax Romana*, the peace of the Empire, was very much a peace enforced at the point of a sword and maintained by looming terror; thus, the theology behind Pilate's actions was clear – the emperor was divine, and not to be put to the test by rebellious peasants. By contrast, Jesus came into Jerusalem in humility upon beasts of burden to restore the people of Israel and make them really God's people again. The deliberate and evocative symbolism of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem announced loud and clear that the Kingdom of God was at hand and ready to shake things up. It is no wonder that these events threw the city into turmoil (21:10)!

His radical shakeup meant questioning how things were done in the running of the Jerusalem Temple, in which Jesus would later sweep in, and overturn the tables of the moneychangers. It meant standing against the exclusion of the poor, sick and marginalised people from Israel's national religious life, and it meant challenging the authority of the Roman Emperor by pointing towards the very different sort of Kingdom he had come to inaugurate. Both the religious and secular authorities wanted to remove a potential thorn in their side, and they found a ready ally in one of Jesus's own disciples, who perhaps was unimpressed with Jesus not turning out to be a rival 'strongman' out to topple the hated Romans. All their scheming opened the door for those who had shouted 'Hosanna!' on Palm Sunday to cry 'Crucify!' on Good Friday, exposing that within human nature which struggles to cope with a love that crosses boundaries and breaks taboos. We are very good at dividing people up into 'us' and 'them' and anybody challenging this is going to be vulnerable – it was the case then and it remains thus today. Gary Lineker's suspension from broadcasting

on the BBC after criticising the inhumane immigration policies of the UK government is just one recent example.

The events of Palm Sunday, especially when seen together with the disruption of the daily running of the Temple that Matthew describes as following immediately after the triumphal entry (21:12 – 17), spell out what the coming of the Messiah meant, and how crucifixion was the grim endpoint of the trajectory upon which Jesus had embarked. After all, he did not end up upon a cross a mere few days after riding into Jerusalem in such provocative fashion for teaching motherhood and apple pie! By unashamedly making it clear that he was the One whom God's people had longed for come to them at last, he was all set to profoundly disturb both the *Pax Romana* and the fragile power of the religious elite. Crucifixion was a death reserved for rebels and criminals, because it was a method of capital punishment designed for maximal cruelty, and to strip its victims of their dignity. The cross of Christ thus stands in opposition to an empire enforcing conformity at any cost, valuing human life in-of-itself as worthless. By contrast, Jesus' resurrection from the dead points to an emphatic rejection of all that the empires of our sinful world stand for. The power of a love made visible in vulnerability and weakness is stronger than the very worst humanity can throw at it, and unlike a Roman 'conform or die' model, there's no such thing as a person who doesn't matter to God.

So, in these difficult times, where does this leave us? Well, there is much one could say, but as we begin this journey towards the cross, I would like to leave you with a question to ponder through the week. When you look around you, are there structures and accepted ways of running things which mirror how the Roman Empire worked in its 'conform or die, human life does not matter' mentality, and are there any that mirror how the Kingdom of God works in affirming that there is just no such thing as a person who does not matter? If Jesus was to enter into Jerusalem today, the stones would need to shout aloud to make up for all of its people being seemingly locked in permanent

crisis and conflict, but the fundamental challenge remains the same. Can we cope with the pure power of the irrepressible, sky-scraping, death-defying love of God breaking down sacred walls of 'them' and 'us'? Would we too shout 'Hosanna!' today and 'Crucify!' barely five days later, or dare we instead risk remaining open to Love? Amen

### **Spiritual Exercise of the Week**

The way we often read small parts of the Bible can prevent us from seeing the bigger picture. This week, you're encouraged to read the Passion narrative as told in Matthew's Gospel (21:1 – 27:66).

### **Prayers of Intercession**

#### **Lord's Prayer**

#### **Final Prayer – Collect for the Sixth Sunday of Lent**

Eternal God, in your tender love towards the human race  
you sent your Son our Saviour, Jesus Christ,  
to take our flesh and to suffer death upon a cross.  
Grant that we may follow the example of his great humility,  
and share in the glory of his resurrection;  
through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

### **Blessing**

As you journey onwards in God's love,  
towards the foot of the cross of Christ,  
may you step forward boldly and act justly,  
so that through you, all may know that they matter.  
And the blessing of God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
be upon you, and all whom you love and pray for,  
now and for ever. **Amen**