



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 Luke 19:28 – 40

Sermon

When I was a child, I enjoyed drawing maps of fantasy worlds of my own creation, having been inspired by reading Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, and spending many happy hours looking at the beautifully illustrated maps, detailing the varied landscapes Bilbo Baggins and the dwarfs crossed in order to reach the Lonely Mountain. I cannot pretend that my efforts had much artistic merit, but they helped me to understand a point which was made again in the BBC Four series *Maps: Power, Plunder and Possession*. This series highlighted how maps weren't merely about finding the route from A to B, or accurate geographical representation of the earth's topography; they were political as well as practical, works of imagination and ambition as much as science.

They help us to locate ourselves in meaningful ways in relation both to place and people, and from a theological perspective, can enable us to relate the "unseen frame" of reality to the visible and concrete realm that we can see and touch and inhabit (Rowan Williams). The latter is a task of discernment, which Holy Week equips us to undertake by mapping the territory of the human heart and world.

To make sense of the story of Palm Sunday, and enable us to begin to navigate our way through the events of Jesus's last week, we can do worse than attempt to sketch out the cartography of the situation he encountered as he approached Jerusalem. The focus of Luke is upon Jerusalem, through both his Gospel and the Book of Acts, and today's reading places it front and centre. Jerusalem was the capital under King David, who lived around a millennium before Jesus was born, and was the greatest ruler of Israel. As such, its fortunes were vital to Israel's national identity. It was a great city, and home of the Temple, to which many thousands of pilgrims flocked to take part in Passover celebrations, remembering God's liberation of Israel from oppression. The Temple had long been a centre of special devotion, as the space where YHWH was believed to be most readily present, and it focused Israel's longings for future divine restoration.

However, particularly since return from enforced exile in Babylon in the sixth century BCE, Jerusalem had also become the epicentre of what we might describe as a "domination system". This system had three key dimensions – *political oppression*, concentrating power in the hands of a wealthy, landowning elite, at the expense of ordinary people; *economic exploitation*, concentrating about two-thirds of the wealth in the hands of a few, through laws and structures controlling land ownership, taxation, indenture of labour through debt and other measures, that served to make peasant life increasingly precarious; and *religious legitimation*; that told people that this social, economic and political order was God-ordained and thus 'the way things were' and unchangeable. This state of affairs was not unusual; it has been

found everywhere, from first century Israel to medieval England, but it fell far short of the vision of the Kingdom of God Jesus proclaimed, and which had been called for by Israel's Prophets for centuries.

The political contours of Jerusalem's life were shaped by how Israel had been living under Roman occupation since 63 BCE. It was their normal practice to appoint collaborators from existing wealthy elites, who were responsible for maintaining order and ensuring the tribute tax was paid annually to Rome. However, following power struggles amongst the various ruling families, they appointed Herod the Great as king. He built many magnificent buildings, including the huge port at Caesarea Maritima that would later become the centre of Roman administration, the luxurious palace overlooking the Temple (where Pilate would preside when he was in Jerusalem), and the massively expanded Temple complex Jesus and his followers knew. When he died in 4 BCE, Herod's patch was divided up between his three sons but Rome took control itself of Judea and Samaria following a revolt, ten years later. Power was delegated to the Temple authorities, led by the High Priest, who at the time of Holy Week was Caiaphas.

Keeping this in mind shows the ruling Jewish elite against which the teaching of Jesus was levelled in those days following Palm Sunday had to negotiate a delicate balancing act. They needed to be viewed as sufficiently onside with their Roman paymasters to maintain their status and standing, but distinctive enough to stop their people from rebelling. This was becoming harder; confiscation of land which had often been in families for centuries, heavy taxation (including tithes on agricultural production and the Temple Tax), and a lack of secure alternatives to feed one's family, were fuelling the Zealot movement seeking the violent overthrow of the secular and religious authorities that centred around Jerusalem, and its Temple. As the powerful and the wealthy benefited from this 'domination system', 'legitimated' via the Temple's claim to be the only place where forgiveness from God could be found, it's perhaps no surprise that Jesus received the kind

of reception he did. After all, he had arrived in a deliberately different fashion to the display of force when Pilate entered by the main gate, with soldiers, cavalry and weapons, around that same time, to keep the peace during Passover.

So, having 'mapped the territory' into which Jesus rode on that Palm Sunday, it's now time to turn to the particular details of his entrance, and the ways he was thus beginning to redraw Israel's map. We do not know if he arranged in advance to have a colt ready for him, but it was no accident that he chose to arrive in Jerusalem on a donkey, as the prophet Zechariah had talked about. It's also no accident that he chose the east gate of the city, as Ezekiel prophesied that this is the gate through which the Messiah would enter. The residents and visitors in Jerusalem understood what he was doing and responded by spreading their cloaks in front of him, after his friends had placed theirs on top of the colt as a makeshift saddle. Jesus reminded them of king David, and so they called out 'Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!', echoing Psalm 118. In other words, all this was designed to reveal that something special was happening; God was at last coming to set the people free.

So, one of those two entrances into Jerusalem was about terror and keeping people in line, whilst the other was about love and the hope of new beginnings. The *Pax Romana*, the peace of the Empire, was very much peace enforced at the point of a sword, and 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 in humility on a beast of burden to restore the people of Israel, make them truly God's people again. The deliberate symbolism of Jesus's entry into Jerusalem announced loud and clear that the Kingdom of God was at hand, and ready to shake things up amid the domination system that failed to reflect the value of all people in God's eyes.

Consequently, this meant questioning how things worked within 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 Roman imperialism by pointing to the radically different Kingdom which Jesus 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 was perhaps unimpressed with his not redrawing the political map by being a rival strongman out to violently topple the hated Romans. This scheming opened the door for those who gave acclamations on Palm Sunday to scream 'Crucify!' on Good Friday, exposing that within our human nature which struggles to cope with a love that crosses boundaries, and challenges 'the way things just are'.

After all, Jesus did not end up on a cross a few days after riding into Jerusalem in provocative fashion for going onto preach motherhood and apple pie! Crucifixion was reserved for rebels and criminals, as it was a method of capital punishment designed for maximal cruelty, and to strip its victims of all human dignity. The cross of Christ, then, stands in opposition to a Roman Empire enforcing conformity at any cost, valuing human life in-of-itself as worthless. By contrast, Jesus' resurrection from the dead points to the emphatic rejection of all this stood for, and indeed stands for. The power of Love made visible in vulnerability and weakness is stronger than the worst human beings can throw at it, and unlike that domination system which served the interests of the Roman imperial power and their willing collaborators among the Jerusalem elites, this is a Love that leads to justice, and upholds the value of all people in God's eyes. So, as we survey the map at the beginning of Holy Week, where will you stand? Dare you join Jesus on his path of death and resurrection? Only time will tell...

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 Luke's Gospel (Luke 19:28 – 23:56).

Prayers of Intercession

Creator of the world, **hear our prayer.**

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**