

Mark 11: 1-11 & John 12: 12-16 Palm Sunday Power Parody

The church year does not coincide with the calendar year, but it does have its own seasons—periods of time with special observances and traditions. We begin the church year with Advent which climaxes with the birth of Christ. We speak of Christmas Eve as a Holy night. Today is the last Sunday which falls within the special season we call Lent. The final week of Lent draws to a close not with one special day and service but several. We call this coming week Holy Week. Today begins the observance of the last week of Jesus' earthly life—and we call it Holy. As usual the lectionary provides texts which are relevant to our understanding of the biblical story we are remembering. Unlike most Sundays however, there are more than the usual number of selections listed as lectionary readings because this day has two designations on the church calendar. Today is traditionally and more commonly known as Palm Sunday, but it is also known as Passion Sunday. These two designations serve a purpose—this coming week in the story of Jesus' life began with his entry into Jerusalem for the celebration of the Passover. We have read two gospel passages this morning describing this one event. The subtitle for both of these passages refers to it as Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Thus we have the association with waving palm branches and crowds shouting Hosanna. Since next Sunday we will celebrate the good news of Christ's victory over death in the resurrection, the church also holds forth the option of considering the events which happen during the week—especially the events taking place in the upper room, the garden of Gethsemane, the arrest, the disciple's abandonment of Jesus with Peter's denial of him followed by Jesus' trial, conviction and his death on the cross. I think it is important for us to consider all these events of Holy Week because it is in them we glimpse the length to which God is willing to go in order that we might know how great and abundant is the love given to us. But trying to hold all these events together in one service seems to me to be impossible—and gives the impression of schizophrenia—truly a dissonant pairing of celebration and despair. One commentary referred to the combining of these observances into one service as like being on a roller coaster. In attempting to get it all in, we lose the poignancy of the week. Each of the events which happened during that week is important and has a message for us to consider so my hope is that you will observe Maundy Thursday and Good Friday in some way during the week so that the darkness of those days will make the light found on Easter morning even more meaningful. Holy Week describes things that are not pleasant or palatable. There are no easy explanations for the suffering of Jesus which make these events acceptable to our minds. Yet in their contemplation we can only find wonder and awe at extent which God goes in taking on our flesh and enduring suffering and death to claim us as God's own children. But today I would like for us to consider closely this entry Jesus makes into Jerusalem through the two different accounts found in the gospels of Mark and John. I would also like for us to consider that crowd and their context in which this entry of Jesus took place. There is an irony inherent in describing this entry as triumphal when placed into the situation surrounding it. Normally, Mark's gospel is the briefest accounting of any event recorded in the gospels. Yet this morning, it is in Mark that we find all those details of how Jesus arranged the entry from the Mount of Olives—which means he entered Jerusalem through the east gate, a minor entry point on the side of the city nearest the Temple Mount. Mark describes the disciples being sent into the village to find a never before ridden colt. The details of where the colt is located and the

exchange which will allow the disciples to take the colt are given by Jesus before he sends them into the village. This display of knowledge beforehand by Jesus is much more typical of John's gospel which emphasizes the divinity of Jesus throughout. In contrast in this reading, John's gospel just says Jesus found a donkey colt and sat on it as he entered the city of Jerusalem. In John, the crowd is also one that has come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. They go out to meet Jesus because they have heard of the things he has done, especially the raising of Lazarus. Mark offers no explanation for the crowd presence as Jesus entered the city. But both accounts tell us that there were many people there who watched Jesus enter the city. Both accounts tell us that people who met Jesus as he entered were carrying palm branches. Mark tells us they spread them before him on the road as he entered. John does not say what use they made of the palm branches. This entry is the opening scene portrayed by the film makers as they depict the events of Holy Week. In the film version it looks exciting and very celebratory. But would this procession really have been seen as a triumphal entry considering the pomp and ceremony which usually accompanied a triumphal entry? Jerusalem and the people gathered there to celebrate the Passover were used to the Roman occupiers making triumphal entries. In fact, it is likely that the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate made a triumphal entry into the city at the West Gate very near to this same time. Pilate lived near in the coastal area of the Mediterranean and his journey to Jerusalem at Passover would have been to show these people who was in control; to make very visual the power and presence of Rome among them. Pilate would have entered escorted by soldiers riding on a war horse to show these pilgrims coming to Jerusalem the might and power of Rome. This entry would also have been accompanied by shouting crowds—because there would have been a price to pay if proper homage had not been given to the power of Rome. Looking back through the lens of our experience we view this event as a celebration. But comparing a single man riding into town on a donkey to the entry the Roman governor made brings sheds a somewhat different light on Jesus' entry. Both gospel accounts tell us of Jesus' entry and are unconcerned with what the Roman governor might have been doing. But those people in the crowd would have been very aware of being under Roman rule. In the things which they shouted you can sense what their expectations were. They were anticipating a triumph by this man which would free them from Rome and restore Israel. "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!" These shouts as recorded in the biblical record were treasonous. Jesus entry gave expression to the radical notion that the Roman Empire's dominance was being challenged. Jesus' entry was anti-imperial; a mocking of the conquering emperor. This challenge was by a single man riding on a donkey without any weapons of war; a man seemingly powerless. But the crowds greeting his arrival expected a triumph which would bring Israel back under the rule of the Davidic kings.

I don't remember many Palm Sunday celebrations of palm waving from my childhood. The worship that day considered the events of the triumphal entry, but had no special activities associated with it. However, when my children were young things had changed. Palm branches were handed out to the adults entering the sanctuary and during the children's time they took their palm branches and marched around the sanctuary as we all stood and waved our branches and sang the hymn: Hosanna, loud hosanna, the little children sang. That hymn goes on to tell us that the children sang Jesus' praises. In the hymn we just sang, the refrain

tells us to give all glory, laud and honor to Thee, Redeemer King to whom the lips of children made sweet hosannas ring. Considering how that word hosanna is used, what do you think it means? I know that once upon a time I equated it with Alleluia; a term which is an imperative command: Praise the LORD! But hosanna is not exactly a command for praise, but instead it is a plea. The crowds were crying out to Jesus to be saved. It was a cry for help. This seems appropriate when you think about it, for the people came to Jerusalem to celebrate their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. God acted to deliver them from Pharaoh; the Passover festival was instituted as a remembrance of that action on their behalf. Thus the juxtaposition of celebratory palm waving and a plea for deliverance is consistent from a people celebrating their past and anticipating that this man was the one who would restore the kingdom of David. The people desired the vanquishing of the Romans and the crowning of a Jewish king. The irony of this is that Jesus did answer their plea—that was the reason that he descended to earth and became flesh—so that the people would be saved---just not in the way they desired or expected. Mark's passage ends like this: "Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the Temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve." Whatever the crowd had been expecting to happen with Jesus' entry did not happen. Their excitement over the coming of a revolution to sweep away one empire and replace it with other is deflated. Their expectations are unmet. Their unmet expectations turn the crowd's adulation into disappointment and finally to the rage we see later in the story. What is the take away message for us this morning? Since we know that Jesus did triumph in the end, deliverance was granted we can join the crowd in waving the palm branches. But in this story we also find that the ways in which God answers are pleas for deliverance are rarely the ways which we expect. The purpose for which God's son came was not to replace one earthly empire with another, but to restore God's creation to the path God intended. Jesus orchestrates the entry into Jerusalem to demonstrate that the Roman way of power was not what God desired. The Roman power was coercive in nature. God's way of power is different. It is an inward power which calls us to a certain way of living; a certain way of interacting with those around us. When we consider Jesus' entry into Jerusalem we need to remember that the deliverance we receive is a gift offered voluntarily at great cost. We also need to shout: Hosanna! Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord. Amen.