



EMMANUEL EPISCOPAL  
CHURCH, GENEVA

**Palm Sunday**  
**5 April 2020**  
**Sermon**

There is something quite wonderful about Palm Sunday: the color, noise, and vibrancy of those who gather to celebrate our Lord's entry into Jerusalem. The arrival of spring with its welcome warmth and new life. The singing of the birds as all creation is caught up in the praise of God. And for me, Palm Sunday is extra special as it marks the third anniversary of being your Rector here at Emmanuel. What a joy these past three years have been! When you tune into the Convocation service later this morning, you may be able to see pictures of that 2017 Palm Sunday. Look closely and you will see that you haven't aged a day! It is good to remember the joy, expectation, and happiness that we shared on that Palm Sunday. A wonderful service followed by a splendid Breaking Bread which not only honored my arrival but celebrated Miss Jones' birthday. Which reminds me: a belated Happy Birthday, Miss Jones! I am sorry but there will be no seeing the sights of London this year but we all send our heartfelt love and prayers to you as you begin another year embraced in God's love.

Of course, this Palm Sunday is markedly different. Emmanuel is not thronged with a throng of joyful, celebratory parishioners. Indeed, when historians in future years look back to Palm Sunday 2020, they may ask initially how a Rector after three years could move from having a full church to a virtually empty one without being fired by the Bishop! But they will learn that we are living in exceptional times as we navigate a pandemic whose horrific and exponential impact is just unfolding before our eyes.

Jesus too lived in exceptional times. The tension between Jews and the Roman occupying power particularly at the Passover Feast was palpable. There were tensions, too, between the religious authorities and the populace who were becoming increasingly excited about this charismatic, unique, extraordinary Jesus of Nazareth: rumors had begun to fly that he indeed might be the Messiah. It was into this melee, this cauldron of political and religious complexity that Jesus chose very deliberately to enter. The evangelist Matthew draws attention to the fulfillment of scripture quoting from the prophets Isaiah and Zechariah about a king coming to Sion on a donkey. As the crowds throw their garments on the road and pull off branches from the trees to wave, they shout at the top of their voices: "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest."

Along with the evangelists Mark and Luke, Matthew records the crowds shouting: “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” It is a quotation from Psalm 118:26. One can imagine the enthusiasm, the energy, the expectation. This phrase, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” is at the heart of our service of Holy Eucharist. The Great Thanksgiving prayer always opens with praise to God. This is said by the President. The aim is that everyone, reminded of God’s creative sustaining power, is moved along with angels and archangels and the whole company of heaven to sing the Sanctus:

“Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,  
heaven and earth are full of your glory.  
Hosanna in the highest.  
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.  
Hosanna in the highest.”

The first part of the Sanctus echoes Isaiah 6:3 and ushers us into the holiness of God. The next part which we call the Benedictus is from the cry of the crowds on the first Palm Sunday. It is meant to be full of unbridled joy and exuberance. Perhaps as we move from this period of confinement back into our worship at Emmanuel, we can capture this enthusiasm, this energy at this point of the liturgy as we salute our Lord and Savior.

Matthew is unique among all the evangelists in being explicit about the political, religious, messianic claims of Jesus so evident in this entry into Jerusalem. In Matthew’s account, the crowd chants: “Hosanna **to the Son of David**”. This is no naïve, uncalculated procession. The cries of “Son of David” would have alarmed both the Roman occupiers and the temple authorities. The Messianic claims are undeniable. Jesus, the Son of David, God’s Messiah poses questions and challenges the powers that exercise and control the world. Following this Messiah involves change and challenge. As Christians we are called at this time to be open to ways that God through Christ may be inviting us to live differently in a world that has changed so inexorably in the past few weeks. This is likely to involve sacrifice and the discipline of new ways of living. Following Jesus into Jerusalem involves engaging with and facing down all that is wrong and unjust in our world.

In Matthew’s quotation from Zechariah 9:9, it is worth paying attention to the word “humble”: “Look your king is coming to you, **humble**, and riding on a donkey.” The word ‘humble’ also means ‘gentle’. It is exactly the same word that Matthew uses in Matthew 11:28: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke and learn from me; for I am **gentle** and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

Today, on this of all Palm Sundays we are reminded that our Lord is gentle and compassionate; that our Lord is the one who will comfort us and sustain us

through this difficult time. So, while following our Lord is full of challenge, let us know the comfort which Christ brings and let us bring this burden of the Coronavirus to lay at his cross.

The crowds that were so exuberant on that first Palm Sunday did not last the week; as Jesus' situation got more dangerous, the crowds simply melted away; some of them returned to shout: "Crucify him!" It is a reminder to us that a crowded church is not everything; that Christian faith is rather about a journey that requires faithfulness to stand by our Lord in his hour of suffering and death. And so, this Palm Sunday moves now from the jubilation of the crowds to invite you on a very individual journey – a journey that will begin with a reading of the Passion narrative and which will bring you to the death of Christ on Good Friday. Let us journey together this Palm Sunday through to Maundy Thursday and Good Friday so that we enter fully into the passion of our Lord. For it is only through doing this that we can experience the true joy of the new life of God which lies beyond Good Friday in Easter Day.

*Michael*

The Rev. Michael Rusk, Rector  
5 April 2020