

# Readings and Reflection for Palm Sunday

## Introduction

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, during Lent we have been preparing by works of love and self-sacrifice for the celebration of our Lord's death and resurrection. Today we come together to begin this solemn celebration in union with the Church throughout the world. Christ enters his own city to complete his work as our Saviour, to suffer, to die, and to rise again. Let us go with him in faith and love, so that, united with him in his sufferings, we may share his risen life.

## The Collect Prayer for Today

Almighty and everlasting God,  
who in your tender love towards the human race  
sent your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ  
to take upon him our flesh  
and to suffer death upon the cross:  
grant that we may follow the example of his patience and humility,  
and also be made partakers of his resurrection;  
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,  
who is alive and reigns with you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever.

**Amen.**

## Liturgy of the Palms: Matthew 21:1-11 (NRSV)

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, <sup>2</sup> saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. <sup>3</sup> If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately." <sup>4</sup> This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

<sup>5</sup> "Tell the daughter of Zion,  
Look, your king is coming to you,  
humble, and mounted on a donkey,  
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

<sup>6</sup> The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; <sup>7</sup> they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. <sup>8</sup> A very large crowd<sup>[b]</sup> spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. <sup>9</sup> The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

“Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!  
Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

<sup>10</sup> When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?” <sup>11</sup> The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

### **New Testament Reading: Philippians 2:5-11 (NRSV)**

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

<sup>6</sup> who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,

<sup>7</sup> but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

<sup>8</sup> he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross.

<sup>9</sup> Therefore God also highly exalted him  
and gave him the name  
that is above every name,

<sup>10</sup> so that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

<sup>11</sup> and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

### **Reflection**

So, I’ve chosen to reflect upon the Philippians reading, which may seem a bit strange for Palm Sunday, but I feel may speak to us more at these times than the words of the Gospel reading, though we shall touch a little on those later on a little bit. The Philippians reading is one of the earliest Christian writings that we find in our entire Bible (note that all of the Old Testament books are Jewish writings). It was written decades before the Gospel of Matthew. So, this tells us more about what the early Christians were thinking about Jesus, about God, and about their relationship with God, which for me is a fascinating thing. I cannot help but wonder how the early Christians came to believe in such a faith, a faith which puts its trust, which puts its entire being into the hands of a God who died on a cross, the cross being not only the most painful way to die, but also the most shameful. It was

only used for people who were not citizens, people who were outcasts, people who were seen as nothing, outcasts, crucified on a rubbish dump outside the city walls. And so, during this time of Lent, this time of Holy Week, we are bringing ourselves closer and closer to the cross, closer and closer to the God who died on a cross. Only when we get that close can we really experience the joy which is Easter day, the joy of the resurrection, the joy of Mary Magdalene and the disciples. Only when we have the despair can we have that joy in equal measure, and more so.

When we hear the words of the Philippians reading in English it seems to be read out as prose, but the early church probably had it as its creed, or perhaps more like the Gloria which we sing at church. Though we don't sing it during Lent because it is such a joyful hymn we keep it for Easter day, for those six weeks we deprive ourselves so that on Easter day we sing it with the organ blaring, and the choir in fine form. So, when we read the words in Philippians it may be better to read it like the Gloria, like the creed, asserting that it is what we, the Church, believe.

The hymn starts with Jesus's actions... Jesus did this, Jesus took the form of a slave, became human, humbled himself, became an outcast. He could have taken power, it says that he did not grasp, or he did not exploit, the equality he had with God, but humbled himself. And then in the second part, we have God's actions, God exalted Jesus, raising him up, so that every knee will bow before him. We have echoes of Palm Sunday in there, the exaltation of the crowds, and yet the exaltation they gave was very fickle, short-lived, changeable, very imperfect, perhaps we could say, very human. But the exaltation Jesus receives from God is eternal, unwavering, very Godly, very divine. Yet we, as we come to Holy Week, we try to exalt Jesus. Jesus as king, Jesus as God, Jesus as divine. And yet perhaps the exaltation we offer is very fickle, prone to waver, and when we come to worship, having that tinge of doubt in our minds at all times. Yet, this hymn we sing, the early Christians sang, looks forward to a day when we will worship Jesus wholly, perfect in reverence and eternally. But perhaps we can't do that yet, but we strive to.

Paul uses this hymn to challenge and to encourage. Throughout Lent we have been challenging and encouraging ourselves and each other to draw closer to God, to hold on more closely to our faith. We have perhaps found that more challenging at this time. As we are in lockdown, we have many people dying, many people very sick due to a virus that we cannot see, and we often feel so helpless against. And so we feel that challenging nature of Lent has been put to one side, quite understandably and quite rightly, it may feel like Lent has been postponed. As we focus on how am I going to get through this? How are my family, my neighbours getting through this? Who do I need to check up on? Am I still keeping an eye on myself? So with all that going on, the journey of Lent has perhaps been cut short, put on hold for a time, and so I invite you as we begin Holy Week, we have just seven days left, we can look again at the journey we are on, the path we are taking, and ask

ourselves, how can we fully experience Holy Week so that we can fully experience Easter, even if Easter may feel very muted at this time.

So, Paul challenges the Philippians, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” The one who humbled himself, the one who did not grasp onto power, but came in the form of a human being. So, how do we have that mind? Well we might be relieved to know at this time, that the mind does not refer to our emotions, our fickle nature. The mind refers to a mindset an attitude, perhaps, a decision that we take, “I am going to think like this and behave like this, even if I don’t feel like it. I am going to go through Holy Week, journey through Holy Week, even if I don’t feel like it right now, because I need to. Because I need to so that I can experience that Easter joy once again. During this lockdown, I am going to think about other, I am going to think about my neighbours, my family, those who need me. I am going to think about myself. I am going to take those decisions even when perhaps my emotions are completely different to that.”

It’s not an easy thing to do, and it is a lot easier said than done. Somebody said the other day that we shouldn’t ask “What would Jesus do?” as that would be an attempt to put ourselves on a par with Jesus, which we really can’t do. But perhaps we can ask ourselves “What would Jesus NOT do?” and not do those things. So, in lockdown, social distancing, what would Jesus not do? Let’s try not to do those things.

And as we approach Holy Week, a time for coming closer to God, examining ourselves, examining our faith, we need to look again at the attitudes we have. What is the mindset which we hold, our world view which we base our decisions upon? What are our assumptions, our presuppositions, prejudices? What are those, and what do they need to be? Can we use this Holy Week and this time of lockdown and isolation to reassess how we live our lives, how we treat others, how we interact with others, how we treat this world? So that when we reach Easter season, and leave this time of lockdown, our mindset, our whole way of living, has changed, hopefully for the better: For the good of creation, for the good of others, for the good of ourselves, for the good of our journey with God.

I do wonder what the crowds on Palm Sunday were expecting to happen in the following week, probably not what did happen. I wonder what you are expecting from this week to come, and what you might get out of it. And what surprising things God may do for you, with you and through you, for the good of the world, the good of others and the good of yourself. I end this reflection with the following prayer:

### **The Creed**

Let us affirm our faith in Jesus Christ the Son of God.

Though he was divine,  
he did not cling to equality with God,  
but made himself nothing.

Taking the form of a slave,  
he was born in human likeness.

He humbled himself  
and was obedient to death,  
even the death of the cross.  
Therefore God has raised him on high,  
and given him the name above every name:  
that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bow,  
and every voice proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.  
Amen.

### **Post Communion Prayer for Palm Sunday**

Lord Jesus Christ,  
you humbled yourself in taking the form of a servant,  
and in obedience died on the cross for our salvation:  
give us the mind to follow you  
and to proclaim you as Lord and King,  
to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

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