

**Dorset South and West Methodist Circuit  
Service for 24 March 2024, Revd Gwyneth Owen**

**Palm Sunday**

O give thanks to the Lord, for God is good;  
God's steadfast love endures for ever! (Psalm 118:1)

**Hymn**

1 Ride on, ride on in majesty! Hark, all the tribes "Hosanna" cry;  
your humble beast pursues its road, with palms and scattered garments strowed.

2 Ride on, ride on in majesty! In lowly pomp ride on to die.  
O Christ, your triumphs now begin o'er captive death and conquered sin.

3 Ride on, ride on in majesty! The winged squadrons of the sky  
look down with sad and wondering eyes to see the approaching sacrifice.

4 Ride on, ride on in majesty! your last and fiercest strife is nigh.  
the Father on God's sapphire throne awaits God's own anointed son.

5 Ride on, ride on in majesty! In lowly pomp ride on to die,  
bow your meek head to mortal pain, then take, O God, your power and reign.

Henry Hart Milman 1791-1868

**Prayer – embody this prayer slowly, slowly, slowly**

*Gracious God, here we are, in this space, held by love, embraced for eternity.*  
Here I am, focusing on you, choosing to worship, to seek, to be open, to sense your presence.  
Be present to me now.

Here I am, in this space. It's an ordinary space with no props for worship, no preacher, no organ, no flowers -but it's holy ground. Be present to me now.

Here I am, in this space, held by love. Held by love. Help me to allow those words to sink in deeply, in refreshing, forgiving and generous ways. Be present to me now.

Here I am, in this space, held by love, embraced for eternity. For eternity. God, that's a long time and beyond time – like you are. Be present to me now. In the name of Christ. Amen.

**The Donkey. G.K. Chesterton.**

When fishes flew and forests walked and figs grew upon thorn,  
Some moment when the moon was blood then surely I was born.

With monstrous head and sickening cry and ears like errant wings,  
The devil's walking parody on all four-footed things.

The tattered outlaw of the earth, of ancient crooked will;

Starve, scourge, deride me: I am dumb, I keep my secret still.

Fools! For I also had my hour; one far fierce hour and sweet:  
There was a shout about my ears, and palms before my feet.

### **Hymn**

Hosanna, hosanna, hosanna in the highest  
Hosanna, hosanna, hosanna in the highest  
Lord we lift up Your name with hearts full of praise  
Be exalted, oh Lord my God Hosanna in the highest

Glory, glory, glory to the King of kings  
Glory, glory, glory to the King of kings  
Lord we lift up Your name with hearts full of praise  
Be exalted, oh Lord my God Hosanna in the highest

Carl Tuttle b1953 © Shadow Spring Music.

### **John 12:12-16**

The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting,

‘Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—  
the King of Israel!’

Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written:

‘Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.

Look, your king is coming,  
sitting on a donkey’s colt!’

His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.

### **Reflection**

I’m not sure why, but I have always liked Chesterton’s poem that offers a commentary on Palm Sunday from the donkey’s perspective (do read it again). It starts in a magical Disney-type world of flying fish, walking forests, surprising fig harvests and a blood moon. It then comes down to earth as the donkey tells us about his birth, his sense of ugliness and isolation – he seems to see himself as a sick joke. But...he has a secret, for he reveals that he was the chosen means of transport for Jesus entering Jerusalem hence, “There was a shout about my ears and palms before my feet”. He played an important role even though he thought little of himself. Maybe that’s one thing Chesterton wants us to reflect upon: however inadequate we feel, regardless of how far our self-esteem or sense of self-worth has fallen, wherever we feel our faith-levels are at right now, there is a role for us in the mysteries of God. I wonder what your role might be in carrying the Jesus story where you are. Please don’t read any further until you’ve reflected on that question.

Enough of donkeys! What are we to make of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem? Well, the Bible accounts are interesting for their similarity and differences. John's account, above, for example, is brief and has the crowds who had gathered in Jerusalem for the Jewish Passover festival going out to meet Jesus with palm branches. John tells us that some of this crowd had witnessed Jesus bringing Lazarus back to life which is why they heralded him with shouts of Hosanna -part of a hymn from Psalm 118 which identifies Jesus as the one who has come "in the name of the Lord".

Matthew has similar hymns of praise from the crowds and tells us the password the disciples had to use to get access to a donkey for Jesus. The crowds seem to have been travelling with Jesus towards Jerusalem and put cloaks and branches (unidentified) in Jesus' path. Jesus arrives at the Jerusalem temple and causes total mayhem by driving out the animals waiting to be used in sacrifice and turning over the tables of the money lenders.

Mark is similar to Matthew, except he tells us that Jesus arrived at the temple and simply looked around it before leaving for Bethany with his disciples.

Luke is similar to both Matthew and Mark but tells us that Jesus wept over Jerusalem as he approached it, before going on to cause that mayhem in the temple. Also, there are no branches of any type in Luke's account – just cloaks spread before the donkey.

So, for Matthew, Mark and Luke, the crowds seem to have been travelling with Jesus to Jerusalem for the Passover and there is an ad hoc stirring of praise and recognition of Jesus being the one foretold from the Jewish scriptures -Psalm 118 (and Zechariah 9:9. *Rejoice, greatly, Daughter Zion! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey*).

For John, the crowds were already in Jerusalem and had witnessed Jesus' power over death in the Lazarus event and so came out to meet him, ready with palm branches and the hymn (Psalm 118) chosen (tune unknown!).

I wonder how courageous folk needed to be in identifying with Jesus in this way? The Romans were always on the prowl, and security was especially tight during the Passover festival when the population of Jerusalem, according to a 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish historian, would have swelled from around 80,000 to over 2 million people. Indeed, some think that this ragamuffin procession entering Jerusalem from the east with Jesus countered a much more regal and pompous procession entering Jerusalem from the west, at the centre of which was Pontius Pilate, taking up residence in the city precisely because it was so crowded and there was often trouble. How courageous did people need to be?

I'm writing this just a few days after the funeral of the Russian dissident, Alexei Navalny. The crowds that attended his funeral showed tremendous courage and, perhaps, many will pay severe consequences for supporting this harsh critic of Putin. But they believed in Navalny's stance and felt compelled to offer him support and to keep his message alive, even in death.

I wonder how courageous you and I need to be as Christians in our 21<sup>st</sup> century society? Are we with Matthew, Mark and Luke, looking for Christ in bursts of enthusiasm along with the crowd? Or are we with John, making a deliberate effort to go out of our way to find Christ because of our experience of him in our own lives and in the lives of others?

Maybe it's bit of both, do you think? Today, as we remember Jesus riding into Jerusalem towards his death, let's recall the tale of Chesterton's donkey – and take heart. And let's ask

ourselves how courageous we are in acting and speaking out our faith. We Christians are in a minority and now, as then, Jesus needs courageous followers. And, we know the story too well – when push came to shove Jesus approached Calvary bereft of friends. Let's try and make sure he is not bereft of friends now. Amen.

### **Prayers of Intercession**

Gracious God

You are with the homeless, the asylum seeker, the stranger.

Donkey-riding Christ: **may we follow you there.**

You are with the sick, the dying, the lonely

Donkey-riding Christ: **may we follow you there.**

You are with the peacemakers in all lands

Donkey-riding Christ: **may we follow you there.**

You stand with those in need;

Donkey-riding Christ: **may we follow you there.**

You give courage to the fearful;

Donkey-riding Christ: **may we follow you there.**

You hold all things in love

Donkey-riding Christ: **may we follow you there.** Amen

Lord's Prayer

### **Hymn**

1 My song is love unknown— my Saviour's love to me;

love to the loveless shown, that they might lovely be.

Oh, who am I, that for my sake my Lord should take frail flesh and die?

2 He came from His blest throne salvation to bestow;

but they made strange, and none the longed-for Christ would know.

But oh, my Friend, my Friend indeed, who at my need His life did spend!

3 Sometimes they strew his way, and his sweet praises sing;

resounding all the day hosannas to their King.

Then "Crucify!" is all their breath, and for his death they thirst and cry.

4 Here might I stay and sing, no story so divine:

Never was love, dear King, never was grief like thine!

This is my Friend, in whose sweet praise I all my days could gladly spend.

Samuel Crossman (c1624-1683)

### ***Closing Prayer***

*Gracious God, here I am, in this space, held by love, embraced for eternity.*

*May your blessing be mine today and always. Amen*