

# **Sermon on Palm Sunday, 13 April 2025**

## **by Geoff Oates, Lay Reader**

*Readings: Psalm 118. 19-29 & Luke 19. 28-40*

Whenever we have a bible reading with a good story to it – whether it is one of Jesus’ parables, his teaching stories, or a real bit of historical narrative like Palm Sunday – I often like to ask myself, and of course to ask you, where you might find yourself among the characters we hear about. If this was a play, what part would be yours?

In one sense, for Palm Sunday we have already chosen our part. We have processed into church together, identifying ourselves with the crowd that accompanies Jesus, waving palm branches, shouting ‘Hosanna’, and throwing down our coats to make a kind of red carpet for the celebrity. Well, perhaps we haven’t played the role with quite so much authenticity, as I see most of our coats have made it safely into church with us!

Just a bit of theatre, in an English village/suburban churchyard? Well, yes, and why not? The whole of Palm Sunday was itself a stunning act of political theatre. Jesus, usually so reticent about declaring who he is, goes public in typically Jewish fashion. He takes the imagery of the old psalms and prophecies, acts them out and lets them proclaim him as the new King. A King riding on a donkey – promised by the prophet Zechariah 400 years before; the palm branches and acclamations of Psalm 118, an ancient hymn that ends with a joyful procession to the Temple; the cloaks on the ground from 2 Kings 19.... To a scripturally literate nation, the messages were clear.

But can we really claim a place in that crowd? We have read of only a short journey from Bethany to Jerusalem; two miles, maybe. But for the crowd, it is the culmination of a Passover pilgrimage. They are Galileans, northerners, they have already walked 90 miles or more to get to Bethany. It is the long walk of faithful pilgrimage and patience that earns them a place in that crowd. Have we done what it takes to earn our place on the stage?

There's another message in Psalm 118. We know it was close to Jesus' heart because he will quote it tomorrow in Jerusalem. "The stone the builders rejected has become the chief corner stone". Jesus, like his followers, knows he is an outsider. Galileans have a different dialect, suspect manners and questionable ethnic heritage. The Judean establishment views them with anxious suspicion. The Palm Sunday procession has a destination - the Temple; the embodiment in stone of Judea's faith and national identity. There will be rejection, and upheaval.

If Jesus is the new cornerstone, building must begin again from the very foundations upwards. All that is there now must first be brought down. Are we, the pilgrim crowd, ready for that challenge?

There's another crowd in Jerusalem already. We will meet them outside Governor Pilate's residence five days from now. Their spokespeople are already there at the end of our reading; the Pharisees who plead with the pilgrims to calm down and keep quiet. That crowd is not ready for the challenge, not ready for the radical renewal Jesus offers. They have not made the pilgrimage, and, like most 'insiders', they are happy to defend

their status quo. Let us take care that we do not find ourselves in that crowd when the chips are down.

But now, on a lighter note, let's go back to the character in the drama that didn't join us for our procession today – the donkey!

It is, perhaps, unfortunate that to our modern, western and largely urban mind, donkeys are imagined as either cute, or ridiculous. Donkey rides are for children. They were once a staple of English seaside holidays – you'll still find them at some of the more retro resorts and at petting zoos around the country.

But, to our eyes, an adult riding a donkey looks clumsy and out of proportion, and, of course, donkeys – along with their near-cousins, the mules – are proverbially stubborn and uncooperative. Not what you want when you are a Messiah needing to make a big entrance into your capital city.



But that is not what 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestinian people saw. The donkey was the go-to working animal, the white van of its day, and the minibus. Hardworking, reliable and cheap to run. Adaptable as a draft animal, a pack animal or even for passenger transport. In the rough, hilly environment of Judea

and Galilee, it was also wonderfully sure-footed, because donkeys have the brilliant gift of a very wide field of vision; they

are one of the few animals that can look ahead where they are going, and see their own back legs at the same time!

But donkeys, significantly, did not do war! Old Zechariah promises a king who comes in peace and humility. He contemptuously waves away the horses that draw the chariots of Kings and noblemen into battle. A King who is one of us, not one set above us.

Much of the world still uses donkeys. A few years back, I encountered working donkeys, to my great amazement, in the streets of Cairo – pulling their carts in the morning rush hour, weaving amongst the motorised traffic. The motor vehicles – an incongruous mix of businessmen's Mercs, battered old pick-up trucks and cheap Asian cars – swerved, surged and braked chaotically through the congestion. In contrast, the donkey carts skipped through the spaces with confident agility and complete disregard for traffic rules, and I pondered, ruefully, that I would probably have had a quicker, safer and less bumpy journey on a donkey cart than I did in my chauffeur-driven BMW!

Maybe that's another reason Jesus chose a donkey to get him to the Temple – an example to us.

We are also called to carry Christ to where he needs to go – to the temple of our humanity in all its frailty, in all its need of restoration and reconstruction.

He needs people who are used to covering the miles and carrying the burdens, reliably, unfussily, coping with the busy

traffic of life however it confronts us, living out his Gospel humbly and peacefully, and bravely.

He needs people with that divine gift of a wide field of vision that sees the wonders and needs of the world and the safe paths to travel through it.

He needs people who can hold in one vision the often difficult reality of where we are now, and the beauty of we are called to be. If that's what a donkey can do, I'd be proud to be a donkey – for Christ.

Amen