

Service Transcript

Palm Sunday March 28th 2021

Service Leader: Delyth Mayhew

Speaker: Mark Reid

Welcome -

To everyone watching and listening this morning.

It is good to be together again – a year since we watched our first online service!

How we've got used to it! And will have to continue for some time yet.

But God has blessed us in it, and continued to strengthen and walk with us through it all.

I invite you to check the notice sheet for this week – so that it can inform your prayers and remind you of all the Easter weekend online services.

And – A Happy birthday to anyone who has had a birthday recently or will be celebrating one this coming week.

Leader: Rejoice greatly, O people of Zion!
Shout in triumph, O people of Jerusalem!
Look, your king is coming to you.
He is righteous and victorious,
yet he is humble, riding on a donkey—
even on a donkey's colt.

All: Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Leader: You are our God, and we will praise You!

All: You are our God, and we will exalt You!

Leader: O give thanks to the Lord, for He is good.

All: His faithful love endures forever!

*Let us enter the city with God today,
And sing hosannas to our king,
Let us turn our backs on the powers that grasp and control,
And open our hearts to the son of God riding on a donkey.
Let us join his parade,
Surrounded by outcasts and prostitutes, the blind and the leper.
Let us follow the one who brought freedom and peace,
And walk in solidarity with the abandoned and oppressed.
Let us shout for joy at Christ's coming and join his disciples,
Welcoming the broken, healing the sick, dining with outcasts.
Let us touch and see as God draws near,
Riding in triumph towards the Cross.*

The Donkey

You may remember the poem that Carl read in our carol service about the donkey, the one who is supposed to have carried Mary to Bethlehem. He could see into the future and knew that a donkey would be important again in the story of Jesus.

And so we meet another donkey – the one who carried Jesus into Jerusalem before the first Easter. Here was a common pack animal carrying the Saviour to his death.

The Palm Sunday story features the donkey, ambling its way into Jerusalem, with Jesus on its back, navigating its way through the crowds waving branches and shouting “Hosanna!”.

But that is the sort of work a donkey does, isn't it?

This donkey was a beast of burden, expected to do menial chores of transporting or hauling. It was a worker – one of the blue collar workers of the animal kingdom.

But here we have a donkey, an ordinary creature, called to do extraordinary things – yet nothing requiring extreme effort or hardship.

It did something that ended up being wonderfully and powerfully significant.

But, in that moment, what it actually did was simple and unremarkable.

It walked. And carried someone. That was it.

It didn't know what an important task it had, what impact its journey that day would make on the world. All it knew was “One foot in front of another”.

It didn't cross the donkey's mind to be anything it wasn't or do anything different from normal.

It's worth remembering as a church community, as well as individual people of faith, that we are not asked to be something we are not.

Despite all we have to do at present – physically distancing ourselves, keeping away from our church buildings and all the other limitations on our lives, we are not called to change who we are.

We are still to be the best we can be, to do what we do well, to do what comes naturally – in a new way maybe, but we still carry Christ's message with us.

In our own small, insignificant way, we will be the presence of Christ in the present and post Covid world.

The donkey wasn't asked to do anything beyond what it was called to do – to walk, to carry, to be itself. This is all Christ asks of us.

We're never going to have the big picture make sense for us.

All we should see are the needs and opportunities around us – and our companion for the journey – who is Jesus.

And we carry Christ with us, in us – not as a burden but as a gift and a promise and a reminder that we are never alone.

ALL ***Lord Jesus, we greet your coming,
pilgrim messiah, servant king, rejected saviour.***

LEADER You trod the way of a pilgrim
and ascended the hill of the Lord;
you followed the path of your calling
even though Mount Zion gave way to the hill of Calvary.

ALL ***Lord Jesus, help us to follow.***

LEADER You rode into Jerusalem on a donkey,

symbol of humility and lowliness,
mocking our dream of pomp and glory,
demonstrating the foolishness of God before the eyes of the world.
You have shown us the way of humble service, the way of true greatness.

ALL ***Lord Jesus, help us to follow.***

LEADER The cries of 'Hosanna' soon turned to 'Crucify'.
The acclamation of the crowds gave way to fear and contempt.
You have shown us the cost of love
and you have called us to follow in your way:
pilgrims of the kingdom,
living out the foolishness of God,
and trusting only in your forgiving faithfulness.

ALL ***Lord Jesus, help us to follow.***

AMEN

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Prayers of intercession

As we begin our intercessions this morning, let's start with this prayer for Palm Sunday in this strange year.

Our Father,
On this Palm Sunday, things are different.
No children waving palm branches in processions,
no collective singing of hosannas, loud hosannas,
no exultant crowds, here or anywhere.
The streets are quiet.
What resonates is the image of you, Jesus,
weeping over Jerusalem,
crying for a people surrounded by enemies,
who do not know the things that make for peace.

Our tiny, lethal enemy is invisible to the naked eye.
We jump when people cough,
we eye each other suspiciously,
not knowing where the danger is lurking.
We fear for all the vulnerable,
and we fear for ourselves.
As our lives are overturned,
and restrictions are put in place,
it's not business as usual
and economic worries are added to the mix.
Anxiety settles like a dense cloud
over all the world.
We need you more than ever, Jesus.

You arrive humbly, unnoticed by many,
cheered by some.

You arrive in the early morning cars
of health workers showing up for their shifts.
You arrive on eighteen wheels as truckers
unload groceries and essential supplies.
You arrive by public transit as scientists
head to their labs day in and day out,
searching diligently for a virus vaccine.
You arrive on foot as neighbours
deliver meals to seniors stranded at home.
You arrive in the ricochet of signals off satellites,
as cyberspace messages of love circle our globe;
millions reaching out to say,
“Are you OK? I miss you.”

Thank you Jesus, that we encounter you day by day
as we see you in the lives of others.

God, hear our prayer
from the lonesome valleys
of this world wide pandemic.
Open our hearts to the possibility
that today is the day of our visitation;
you walk triumphantly through closed doors,
meeting us when others cannot come.
Accept our solitary hosannas,
and gather us together in prayer:
“Blessed is the One
who comes in the name of the Lord.”
In Jesus’ name

Amen

Carol Penner (Modified)

We met with the one we proclaimed as King in our lives as we sang Hosanna just a few moments ago. Let’s remember those before God in silence who find it difficult to pray, who are struggling with faith, with illness, with life right now. Name them before God as you pray that He will speak into their lives right now:

Quiet Music.

We lift all these people before you now
In Jesus’ name
Amen

The Lord’s prayer.

A House of Prayer

I’m sure you know what the headgear I’m wearing is called. It’s a Fez made famous by Tommy Cooper and is part of the national dress of Morocco, called after the city of the same name. A few years ago we went for a day trip to Tangier on one of our holidays to Spain. It was certainly a culture shock! Tangier first

comes across as a contemporary city but once within its walls in the depths of the old town of Tangier we may as well have been transported back to Bible times as we landed in the noise, crowds and haggling of a traditional market.

Whatever we wanted to do to see or to buy it involved a tip and/or a haggle. It's the kind of thing that's no longer common in Europe and most northern Europeans are uncomfortable bartering. But as we walked through the market, the sights and sound reminded me of our story this morning, where Jesus went to the Temple to worship having arrived in the city being hailed as the son of David; as a king, by His disciples. It was the appropriate place to go; to pay homage to God before anything else.

But what did He find? The place was a bustling market and Jesus utters these famous words From Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:1, *"My house will be a house of prayer"; but you have made it "a den of robbers"*. To understand what offended Jesus so much that He turned the traders' tables over and forcibly removed them from the premises, we need to understand the nature of the Temple and worship there at the time.

The Temple was a truly magnificent building. After the Exile the returning Jews could only build a modest structure compared to the original but Herod the Great, yes the one in the Christmas story, wanted to cement his rule in Palestine. He was of Greek descent with some Jewish blood in the family but was not truly Jewish and never converted to Judaism. Yet his dynasty always referred to themselves as Kings of the Jews. He built this magnificent structure by extending the Temple Mount to enlarge the Temple courts.

He did have an understanding of the OT particularly prophecies indicating Jerusalem and the Temple becoming the focus of the worship of God by the Gentile nations. At the centre was the Holy of Holies and the area where the priests operated. Next to that was the Court of Israel where only Jewish men were allowed, together with the Court of Women where Jewish women worshipped. Then there was the Court of the Gentiles, where anyone could visit and pray including foreigners. It was a grand, prestige building and had a reputation for its grandeur. For Herod it was a personal statement

In some ways Herod's Temple had noble intent in allowing foreigners, gentiles to worship the God of Israel on the Temple Mount, but I think our description of it as *Herod's Temple* reflects that down the centuries the structure is seen as something raised to the glory of Herod rather than of God. That said it was in the spirit of Isaiah 56:6-7 where Isaiah writes: *And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant – these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.'*

Many Jews certainly weren't impressed by the Court of the Gentiles stuff even if it had scriptural support. There were a significant number in the ruling parties that regarded all Gentiles as dogs so they allowed the Court of the Gentiles instead to be a marketplace for essential items for Jewish visitors to the Temple, such as good quality sacrifice animals and an opportunity to exchange their "dirty" Roman money into Temple currency to put in the Temple treasury.

Despite its origin the Court of the Gentiles was in the Temple precincts and it had been dedicated as a place for people to pray. The sordid haggling by Jews to get the best price on a sacrifice and the jingling of money being changed was too much for Jesus. Jesus was angry and He let them know it. None of it honoured His Father; it was wrong and it shouldn't have been happening. His Father's House the Temple, was a place of prayer not of commerce. He equates the attitude of the Jews to those in Jeremiah's day who exalted the Temple but dishonoured God.

Here's a flavour:

“Hear the word of the LORD, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the LORD. 3 This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. 4 Do not trust in deceptive words and say, ‘This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!’ 5 If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, 6 if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, 7 then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave to your ancestors for ever and ever. 8 But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless. 9 “Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, 10 and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, ‘We are safe’— safe to do all these detestable things? 11 Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the LORD. Jeremiah 7:1-11

The time was different, but the story largely the same. The Jews prided in their Temple but their behaviour was dishonouring to God and a travesty. *Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the LORD.* To Jesus, the situation that day in the Temple brought forth the same words. The Jewish leaders showed contempt for God’s house, by denying the opportunity for all nations to worship there, changing it for a market which was encouraging people to get a bargain on their sacrifices, when giving of sacrifices should have been the best they could offer. The Jews had failed in their calling to be a light to the nations and in not following the spirit of the Law. What was the consequence of the people dishonouring God’s house? The first Temple was destroyed by the enemy the Jews hated – the Babylonians. In other places in the gospels, Jesus foretold the same fate for the magnificent Herodian Temple – destroyed totally by the enemy the Jews hated – the Romans – in 70AD.

Jesus cleared the Temple so that it could be a place where all the people could hear of and worship God. Where they could pray. Our God is an inclusive God. Jesus came to seek and save all those who were lost, Jew and Gentile. That was always the intent for the restored Judah and of Herod’s Temple but that had all changed by the day Jesus arrived. But when challenged by God’s own Son, confirmed with with the signs and wonders, all they did was to plot His death. We know the rest of that story but His very death on the cross opened a way that all may find forgiveness, hope and salvation.

One of the big lessons of this last year is that we should never be an obstacle to others finding Christ, neither should be our practices, our prejudices or our buildings. For God so loved the world that he gave His only Son that **whoever** believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. We invite all to come to God and find that life and hope. In Christ they find faith, they find a place of prayer – the privilege of speaking with God, wherever and whenever. Remember that this Holy Week. The death and resurrection brings new life to all who believe. That is the Good News we still proclaim.

At first sight, the other bits of Mark 11 we read seem bizarre. The story of the cleansing of the temple is between the story of a fig tree that Jesus cursed. What on earth was that about? Why would Jesus curse a fig tree for having no figs when figs were out of season? Needless to say, the story is nothing to do with a dislike of figs, it is a living (or dying) parable of what Jesus’ motives were for cleansing the Temple and that is made clear in the latter part of our reading today. He cleared a space for all to pray because He wanted people to understand that honouring God was more important than anything else and to replace it with base financial gain was an abhorrence beyond words as we read.

The consequence for the fig tree from the words of Jesus was pretty spectacular. Fig trees are hardy and don’t easily die of drought, yet this one died and impossibly withered in a matter of hours. In life it took months for a hardy tree like a fig tree to wither and die. The disciples saw the significance – with a few words a tree was killed off just like that. What power!

Many commentators like to explore the significance of the death of the Fig Tree as a type of Israel. Fig trees, vines and olive trees are all seen in the OT as being descriptors of Israel, so you could see the cursing of the fig tree for not producing fruit as being a condemnation on the Jews for abusing the Temple with its destruction as the consequence. However I prefer a simpler reason for the story of the fig tree. As it was wrapped around the story of the cleansing of the Temple its message has a direct bearing on understanding what Jesus had done. Jesus wanted to teach the disciples, and anyone else who would hear, about the power of prayer, which is what truly underlaid his anger and actions. Here's what He said as the disciples pointed out the fate of the tree:

'Have faith in God,' Jesus answered. 23 'Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, "Go, throw yourself into the sea," and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them. 24 Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours. 25 And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.'

We must never lose an opportunity to pray, let alone replace it with something else however noble and religious it may seem. Prayer is close to the heart of our faith. The Jews replaced faith in God that results in prayer, with faith in themselves, their traditions and their Temple. Their unforgiving spirit excluded the foreigner from meeting God in prayer at the Temple.

Prayer in the hands of those who have faith in God means that we can ask God to shrivel up fig trees as Jesus demonstrated – it can even miraculously dump a mountain into the sea. If that is possible through faith, think of what God can and will do in the lives of those we pray for.

The greatest display of God's power was the raising up of Jesus Himself from the tomb as we shall mark and celebrate next Sunday. That means if you never have trusted Jesus for yourself that you too can ask Him for forgiveness, ask Him to come into Your live come to know Him and walk with Him through life and into eternity.

If you are a Christian, remember the power of prayer. Don't be afraid to pray. Pray in faith. Pray for others to find Jesus as you have. Don't let anything stand in the way of prayer.

We are going to be looking at unanswered prayer a bit more in April and May as God wants us to be powerful pray-ers. One way our prayers are often ineffective is because something is in the way. The Jews of Jesus' day showed what they thought of prayer by preventing others doing it. They prevented the Gentiles praying from bitter hearts towards those who had polluted their culture and occupied their land. Unforgiveness is a major block to a productive prayer life. Jesus rode into Jerusalem, knowing that be doing so and by challenging the hypocrisy and shallowness of the Jewish leaders that He would end up on the cross. He did this because He desired to forgive you and me for what we have done that is wrong: for our selfishness, hypocrisy, lies, greed chasing after material things and money, our faithlessness our unforgiveness. In that death He opened up a way so that God may pour out His forgiveness on all those who would come to Him asking for it.

Whatever anyone may have done to us that we're not prepared to forgive, God has been prepared to forgive us all the more for how we have wronged Him. *And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.'*

As we start another holy Week, let's come before Him, asking for His forgiveness, that He may open the floodgates of prayer in faith in our lives. Let's pray.

Father

Thank you that you give us the wonderful facility of prayer, that allows us to contact you anytime anywhere. Forgive us for those times when we have acted like the people in the Temple when we have neglected to pray because we have other things even noble things on in our lives. Lord teach us to pray in

power that we might use the facility of powerful prayer to honour You, bring glory to Your name and to show Your love to others.

Lord we pray that you will show us the obstacles we have in our lives that stop us praying in faith effectively, particularly if we harbour unforgiveness. Help us by Your Spirit to mend broken relationships, understanding the lengths You went to bring your forgiveness and hope to us.

Lord Jesus, help us to live Your risen life in the power of Your Spirit.

We ask this in Your holy name,

Amen.

Closing Blessing

Almighty God,

on this day your Son Jesus Christ entered the holy city of Jerusalem

and was proclaimed King by those

who spread their garments and palm branches along his way.

Let those branches be for us signs of his victory,

and grant that we who bear them in his name may ever hail him as our Lord

and follow him in the way that leads to eternal life.

In his name we pray. Amen

And so, good bye for another Sunday. I pray you have a really good week.

Keep well and keep safe, until we meet together again next week.

For Discussion & Reflection

Read Mark 11:12-27 Isaiah 56:6-7 and Jeremiah 4:1-11

1. To what extent did Herod's Temple fulfil the principles of Isaiah 56:6-7? In what ways do you think the practices of marketplace traders in the Court of the Gentiles may be reflected in the modern day church? In what other ways may how we use our church's resources and buildings discourage those that seek God?
2. Why do you think Jesus used the extreme examples of actually killing a fig tree and talking about moving mountains into the sea when talking about prayers of faith? How do we know when it's reasonable to pray for seemingly impossible things, or for that matter, praying through situations that are unclear?
3. Why is it so important that we forgive people we hold anything against. How do we find it in our heart to forgive when we have been grievously wronged? What about feelings we have about people who have died?
4. Jesus reacted angrily and physically in removing the traders and moneychangers from the Temple. In what circumstances do you think that it is OK to feel angry and act dramatically because of it?