

## Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord

*When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, "Why are you doing this?" just say this, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately."' They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, 'What are you doing, untying the colt?' They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting, 'Hosanna!'*

*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!*

*Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!*

*Hosanna in the highest heaven!'*

The account of the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem from St Mark's Gospel is perhaps the most subdued version of the event in the four Gospels. It's not quite what we are expecting to hear. Mark downplays the enthusiasm of the crowd surrounding Jesus, they do not acclaim him as Messiah or King, rather they cheer him as a great prophet.

Under normal circumstances on Palm Sunday, we would have gone on to read the whole of the Passion – the cleansing of the Temple, The Last Supper, Gethsemane, the Trial and the Crucifixion. In his narrative St Mark emphasises the anguish of Jesus who has been completely abandoned. According to St Mark our Lord is resigned to his fate. He makes no response to Judas when he betrays him nor to Pontius Pilate during his interrogation. As he does throughout the Gospel, Mark pointedly portrays the utter failure of the disciples to provide any assistance or support to Jesus or even to understand what is happening. The 'last' disciple who flees naked into the night when Jesus is arrested is a powerful symbol of the disciples who left family and friends to follow Jesus but now leave everything behind to get away from him,

It seems to me, therefore, that there are two major themes for us to ponder. The first is that there is a certain incongruity about today's Palm Sunday liturgy. We begin with a sense of celebration. In other times we would hold and perhaps carry our palm crosses and echo the Hosannas shouted by the people of Jerusalem as Jesus enters the city. But Mark's Passion confronts us with our complicity in the injustice, fear and hatred that leads ultimately to the cross. We welcome the Christ of Victory, the Christ of Palm Sunday; but we turn our backs on the Christ of Suffering, the Christ of Good Friday. The branches of palm are symbols of that incongruity that often exists between the faith we profess with our lips and the faith we demonstrate with our lives.

Secondly, in his account of the Passion, St Mark portrays Jesus as being totally abandoned by his disciples and friends. There is no one to defend him, to support him or to speak for him. He endures such a cruel and unjust death alone. Yet, amid the darkness, a light glimmers. The prophecy of a new temple 'not made with hands' is fulfilled. The curtain of the Temple is torn signifying that a new way is open to God. A pagan centurion confesses his new-found realisation that the crucified Jesus is indeed the 'Son of God'. A member of the ruling council, Joseph of Arimathea, is emboldened to break with his fellow-councillors and asks Pilate for the body of Jesus so that he may have a decent burial. The Passion of Jesus should be a season of hope and a moment of grace for all of us as we seek the reign of God in our own lives – however lonely and painful our search might be.