

Palm Sunday  
April 14, 2019  
Church of the Advent

## **Palm Sunday**

Palm Sunday is a glorious time to belong to a liturgical Christian church. By liturgical I mean all those special things we do the way we do them that go beyond the singing and the preaching: processions behind a cross held high, an altar dressed in candles and very particular linens, gold plated books of scripture, silver bowls for a ritual of handwashing, silver chalices of wine and engraved boxes of special bread that become actors in the mystery of the Eucharist that takes place in front of a priest dressed garments that at the time of their invention were meant to mimic the trappings of royalty. Color coded drapes and dressings not only represent a particular day of celebration, but are meant to invoke particular images and feelings about what is being commemorated. Today the color is red--worn at ordinations and confirmations and on Pentecost to remind us of the fire of the Holy Spirit, and on Palm Sunday to remind us of the blood of the Lamb who was slain. On this one unique Sunday in each year on the Sunday before Easter, we carry palm branches and wave them high, carrying our imaginations into the geography, the climate, and the historical setting where Jesus arrived at his human destiny in Jerusalem. And if that is not dramatic enough for you, some Episcopal churches add lots of incense, dress up in some rendition of middle eastern costumes and engage the services of a live donkey for much longer processions through their neighborhoods. If there is ever an occasion our Christian brethren deserve to call us crazy Episcopalians, it's Palm Sunday.



We enter the church singing *All Glory Laud and Honor* in remembrance of the crowds that welcomed Jesus as a King come to liberate all people from the burdens of their lives—grief and sorrow, sin and shame—with *Hosanna*, a word that we might at first mistake as one of adoration, but is actually from ancient Hebrew meaning “*deliver us*” or “*I beg you to save.*” And then the triumphal entry is accomplished, leaving us with the unsettling premonition of the second act to come---the Passion Narrative. Would that we could stay in celebratory mode for just a bit longer, and perhaps just skip straight to the empty tomb. Oh that Jesus could have been spared what was to come, had that Passover been more than just an annual celebration and commemoration of night long before when the Angel of Death passed over the Israelites in Egypt, on the eve of their liberation.

As the Passion story unfolds before our witness, we remember Our Lord stripped of accolades, betrayed, arrested and brought before judge after judge. We imagine him suffering humiliating torture and then public execution, as our own cries shift from *Hosanna!* to *Crucify Him!* We enter a dark place resisting acknowledgement of any possible participation in mob brutality--a collective cover for our individual sin and shame. How quickly our joy and delight is transformed into grief and regret.

As Palm Sunday becomes Passion Sunday we are offered a kind of Christian-focused reality check that is seldom addressed so directly in our other rich and colorful liturgical seasons. Its message is that life is always full of joy *and* sorrow, love *and* loss, beauty *and* pain. Our greatest task today is to rest in that irony, that tension, that conundrum, that out of out of crucifixion comes resurrection, out of death comes life.

Jesus *was not* the earthly king we cry out to with Hosannas—the one to make us perfectly safe and secure from the evils and disappointments of the world—not at all like the earthly kings we *continue* to cry out for, who never fail to seduce us, and then to fail us. Instead Jesus is the King of Love who, holding all of the fear and anxiety and pain that any human would, carried the weight of our brokenness up a hill and stretched it out on the hard wood of a cross, enduring wounds that would hold the world’s deepest sorrows. Wounds that hurt, wounds that killed. And by his wounds we are healed.

With this Holy Palm and Passion Sunday, Holy Week is upon us, inviting us to enter more deeply into the story that took Jesus and his disciples from the procession of the palms, through a terrible death, to the quiet dawn of the Easter and the saving mystery of the Resurrection, not so far away. Our rich and wonderful liturgical traditions offer so many opportunities during this holiest of weeks to nurture our gratitude for all our God has done for us, and our hope in his death-overcoming love. To remind us of this, I offer a poet's image of that love by RS Thomas, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Welsh Anglican priest:

*The Coming*

And God held in his hand  
A small globe Look he said.  
The son looked. Far off,  
As through water, he saw  
A scorched land of fierce  
Colour. The light burned  
There; crusted buildings  
Cast their shadows: a bright  
Serpent, a river  
Uncoiled itself, radiant

With slime.  
On a bare  
Hill a bare tree saddened  
The sky. Many People  
Held out their thin arms  
To it, as though waiting  
For a vanished April  
To return to its crossed  
Boughs. The son watched  
Them. Let me go there, he said.