

**Palm Sunday/ Sunday of the Passion 2010**  
**Jesus: Neat and Tidy?**  
**Luke 19:28-40; Luke 22:14-23:56**

What is this day today? Celebration or sorrow? If you like your liturgy and theme for a Sunday all cohesive and tidy, then this Sunday won't please you. It's untidy –it jumps from festive acclamation to a long, long, sombre reading of the agonies of Jesus betrayed and Jesus on the cross. We enter to upbeat music, with a sense of occasion and moment, waving our palm crosses under an arch of palm branches. The mood slows; the music changes, and we're plunged into sobriety, and confronted with the ugliness of treachery.

Up until the 1960's, it was straightforward. Two Sundays before Easter, it was Passion Sunday, which heralded in a two week period of Passiontide. The Sunday before Easter was Palm Sunday. No mixing up of these.

So what's going on here? We could blame Pope Paul VI – he changed it all in 1969 to "Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord". Or, as numbers of both Protestant and Catholic writers suggest, the change is more about not having two Sundays in a row of celebration – that the Sunday before Easter needs to take people into the events leading up to Jesus' death. Some try to argue that it's a confusion; that it should be either a celebratory Palm Sunday, or else the more sorrowful Passion Sunday.

But this is the reality of our faith: there is tension; there is paradox; there was a cross and a body in a tomb before there was a resurrection. God doesn't fit into our categories of neat and tidy. To separate out the stories of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem as a joyous and victorious occasion, from the betrayal and tragedy that follows, is to misread the Gospels, and to limit and misread God. It's not a triumphal entry at all; not a triumph in the usual sense, anyway – from the people's perspective, the triumph they want and are cheering, isn't the triumph that does happen, afterwards. There is triumph, of course –the triumph of Easter. But for those people, who don't know, it's all going to turn bad for them and end in blood, denial and tears.

The streets in this scene are lined with cheering disciples who believe this is the king, the Messiah, about to enter Jerusalem. Some no doubt believe he will do something spectacular to free them from Roman rule. We read that "the whole multitude of disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power they had seen". They're focused on the power, the miracles –and who can blame them? These are worth praising God for. But they still haven't got much clue what Jesus is really about, despite what Jesus has said about himself. They know Jesus fits the bill as Messiah, but it's what Jesus will do that will confuse and confront them. For most of these onlookers and followers of Jesus, their expectations of triumph revolve around some sort of victory or show of power – either a military, political, religious victory. That's their hopes and dreams and

expectations. They're a disempowered, oppressed people, aching for liberation; and they're looking out for the promised Messiah, the one who will come to conquer and judge and liberate them. With this underlying tension, it's no wonder the Pharisees are edgy – they're dead scared that this will evolve into a riot, with disastrous consequences if the Romans become involved in putting it down. In Matthew's version we read that the whole city was in turmoil, asking "who is this?"

But Jesus himself – and possibly only he alone – knows he's entering this city for one reason only – to die. The gospel writers are all clear about this. His entry into Jerusalem is full of irony and paradox: a king – God – on a donkey. Triumphant cheers for a death march. The added touches thrown into the scene emphasise and draw attention to himself as the expected Messiah – the whole business of procuring a colt is a direct reference to Old Testament prophecies from Zechariah (9:9) and the Psalms (118:26), with other resonations – from Kings and Habakkuk. Jesus is giving a strong message for people to pay attention to himself as the expected and long-awaited and prophesied Messiah.

But the difference between Jesus as Messiah and the people's expectations of Messiah, hinge around a critical difference. Put simply – Jesus will be the suffering Messiah. Messianic power for Jesus is not brute strength; it's not political or military or any sort of domination, neither is it being a winner in terms of what the world values – the world then and now. It's not about wealth, or holding resources, or academic brilliance, or status of any sort. Notice the exchange between the Pharisees and Jesus – "Teacher, order you disciples to stop". The Pharisees ask and act out of their paradigm of power – hierarchy and dominance – "**order them** to stop". Jesus does not buy into that at all. And the long dramatic reading from Luke today takes us right into Jesus' path towards a triumph beyond the limited grasp and understanding of those cheering crowds. The power of God made known in Christ is not the power of the world; it is nothing like what the world at any time in history has promoted as power and authority.

God's power confronts us with our own desires and reckonings about power. This living God who is Jesus is not Superman; he's not Santa Claus or the President or any of the archetypal heroes and leaders of world history and fantasy. He defies labelling – he feeds five thousand with a basket of bread and fish, performs great deeds of power – miracles – and then he washes people's feet and calls them to be servants of all. Jesus doesn't get excited if we're top of the class, if we're made CEO, or if we make a killing on the stock market. Jesus' power is of a radically different sort. His power is found in peace, in submission and humility, and in death.

The death and resurrection of Jesus is anything but logical and straightforward, when viewed through the lens of the world's values. His example is to let go, to empty himself of all the glory he held as God, to enter into our human existence and experience: even to the point of giving

up his life; and he doesn't use his divinity and power to get himself out of the betrayal he knows is coming, or the kangaroo court that sentences him, nor his crucifixion.

Beneath the cheering of the crowds, hear some of the challenges of this day. Our religion isn't all neat and tidy. It doesn't make sense if judged by the world's standards of success. People find it easier to cheer when they think is a God who is going to rescue them on their terms, according to well thought-out expectations, but what we get is a God on a donkey on his way to death. God in Christ eludes and evades our attempts to regulate him.

To finish: How does this help us in our everyday lives? Look at what you hold in your hand – a cross made from palm fronds, a mix of the symbol of celebration and the barbaric means of Jesus' execution. Symbol of the paradox of our faith – a suffering Messiah, an emptied-out God; God on a donkey.

Keep your cross near you this week as we enter Holy Week. Look on it as a reminder, as a positive sign, that despite dashed hopes, despite all seeming to be lost, despite all appearances to the contrary, in Christ, there is triumph.