



**Sermon preached by Revd Professor David Thompson on 29<sup>th</sup> March 2026**

**Readings:** Matthew 21:1-11; Isaiah 50:5; Philippians 2:5-11

**Palm Sunday**

Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!

Hosanna in the highest heaven! (Matthew 21.9).

One of the difficulties in preaching frequently is thinking of new things to say. These days I don't preach as often as I did once, but the difficulty in thinking of new ways of looking at familiar texts never seems to get easier. The most familiar way of looking at Holy Week in my view is to see it as one long story of conflicting understandings of what Jesus was seeking to do. The way in which the Gospels are written, however, suggests that Jesus went out of his way to explain to his disciples at every stage what he was doing and why he was doing it - indeed why he had to do it that way.

There is one odd point about this story, if you sit back and think about it. Normally, if you have a 'triumphal procession,' it ends at a significant point, such as the Temple, or the Governor's Palace. But if you read the story carefully, this procession seems to end almost before it has begun. What is the significance of that? I suggest that we may find the answer in the verse we read from Psalm 118 at the beginning of the service:

Open to me the gates of righteousness,  
that I may enter through them  
and give thanks to the Lord.

In other words, the point of this procession is not really a procession at all; it is literally an entry into Jerusalem, recalling the entry into the Promised Land, or even the return to Jerusalem after the exile; a new beginning. Psalm 118 was also one of the psalms said at the Passover Festival, establishing a link with that Festival celebrated later that week, which we remember in the celebration of Holy Communion. We cannot be certain that the author of Matthew's Gospel was an eye-witness, though if he was indeed Matthew, the Disciple/Apostle, he would have been; the Disciples are presented in the Gospel Passion Narratives as being almost those who urged the crowds to greet Jesus in this way. But whatever we make of the procession and the palm branches, the compilers of the Lectionary have emphasised the wider Holy Week theme in the Old Testament and Epistle readings. The reading from Isaiah 50 was seen as a clear prophecy of the torture and humiliation of Jesus in Holy Week, and that from Philippians is Paul's classic citation of what was probably an early Christian hymn in praise of God's glorification of Christ in the crucifixion.

One of the aspects of Palm Sunday I always find difficult is this. Quite apart from the fact that the atmosphere is rather out of kilter with the different picture of leadership and indeed the understanding of what it mean to be the Messiah presented by Jesus in word and action, a role far from the image of a military commander and certainly a conqueror, historically the Church through its liturgy has tended to reproduce, so far as it could, the aspects of a traditional Roman Triumph. Consider, for example, the tone of the traditional tune to Henry Hart Milman's hymn, 'Ride on, ride on, in majesty' - *Winchester New* - usually has the overtones of a military march when played by various organists. For that reason, I have chosen a rather different 'Ride on' hymn by John Bell and Graham Maule to bring this service to a close. The same critique could be made of much Church ceremonial, as you saw in the installation of the Archbishop of Canterbury this week - and I can tell you from my own experience in 1979 that setting off in a procession down the length of Canterbury Cathedral without being exactly sure whether there will be a seat for you at the other end is mildly nerve-racking!

But it is easy to be critical; what can we say that is positive about the events of Palm Sunday, that we can build on spiritually? We always have to remember that knowing how the story will end is as often a curse as a blessing. The Gospel-writers make it clear that Jesus knew from an early stage how his story was bound to end, and they wrote their Gospels accordingly to print that understanding on the minds of their readers and hearers. But if that outcome was so obvious, why did so few people see it at the time? The writings in which these things were foretold (if that is the right word) were four hundred

years old at the time. Surely the only answer can be that such an understanding was so contrary to the normal human instincts that it was rejected before being voiced. It is not obvious to suggest that the last would be first, nor that if we suffer an injury, we should not retaliate. One of the most repellent features of the current administration in the United States is the shameless rejection of the normal expectations of good behaviour. The Auxiliary Bishop of Westminster, James Curry, the lead Catholic bishop for the Holy Land in England and Wales, has called the language being used about the War in Iran by the White House appalling, 'reducing people's suffering to a game' (*Tablet*, 21 March 2026, p. 29). Palm Sunday, and Holy Week in general, is a striking affirmation of the whole tenor of Jesus's teaching hitherto - expect the unexpected.

The Gospel-writers suggest that the people in the crowd greeting Jesus were those who were in Jerusalem for the festival, not the children, as some 19th century hymn-writers suggested. This reinforces the link between Jesus's death and the Passover, except that Jesus was not 'passed over' as the first-born sons were in the Festival - indeed the precise opposite, he was the one who was killed. It is almost as though in whatever direction we turn, we are still face to face with death. There is no way out, only a way through. It is important for us to remember that, since our usual reaction is precisely to look for a way out. When I walked on the hills, I was always reluctant to turn back; somehow it always seemed like a defeat. I felt the same when driving; but sometimes you have to admit defeat.

Finally, I return to my text: 'Blessed is he (*or* the one) who comes in the name of the Lord'. This is another quotation from Psalm 118, this time verse 26. In a victory psalm (the last of the so-called Hallel psalms, 113-18) this identifies the divine victor, and it is the one that challenges the religious establishment most. Imagine how people would react today if someone arrived at Westminster Abbey and people began to sing verse 2 of the National Anthem: 'Thy choicest gifts in store/ on him be pleased to pour/ long may he reign'. You would not be wrong to regard those words from the psalm to be effectively Jesus's death sentence (provided the Roman Governor's consent could be obtained). That becomes the story of Holy Week.

DMT, 29<sup>th</sup> March 2026