

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People Palm Sunday – Year C

Introduction. Palm Sunday begins “The week that changed the world”. The last week of Jesus’ earthly life is the focus of one-third of the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, one quarter of Luke and a half of John. The month in which the Israelites were rescued by the LORD from slavery in Egypt became the first month of their year (Exod 12:2), and according to tradition, the first day of the next week after the first Passover, the Feast of Firstfruits (Lev 23:11), was the day the Israelites crossed the Red Sea and were free of the Egyptians entirely. This year, Passover begins at sunset on Good Friday, April 15. So this week is a significant time both in Christianity and Judaism.

Until 1954, the sixth Sunday of Lent in Anglican liturgical calendars was known only as Palm Sunday. But in 1955 it became known as “Second Sunday of the Passion or Palm Sunday” – previously “Passion Sunday” was observed on the fifth Sunday of Lent. Fifteen years later it became “Palm Sunday of the Passion of the Lord”. Thus the reading of the Passion Narrative from one of the Synoptic Gospels is now included in the Palm Sunday Service as well as the Liturgy of the Palms. In this author’s opinion, this has tended to reduce teaching on the significance of Palm Sunday and caused some linking of events in a way that creates antisemitic interpretations.

It is worth noting that on the day on which Jesus rode into Jerusalem, it is likely that the Passover lambs were being selected.

Common Theme. The Liturgy of the Palms readings focus on Luke’s account of the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem and the affirmation of him by the “crowd of disciples” as the Messiah in fulfilment of the prophecies in Psalm 118 and Zechariah 9:9. Who do they think this Jesus of Nazareth is after his three-year public ministry? Jesus asks Philip... and us, “Don’t you know me even after I have been among you such a long time?” (John 14:9)

The readings for Passion Sunday take as their key Luke’s account of Jesus’ passion and death in chapters 22 and 23. The readings from Isaiah are from the “Suffering Servant Songs” which the Gospel record clearly shows were detailed prophecies of what the Messiah would do. The two psalms also describe the unjust suffering of an individual and his appeal to God for deliverance. The reading from Philippians records the Early Church’s understanding of what Jesus suffered. It would behoove us to simply read and ponder these Scriptures to allow God’s Word to flood our souls. It is an amazing drama in which Almighty God humbles himself and rescues sinful humanity (cf. Exod 6:6-8 where the LORD promises five times, “I myself will ...”; “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself...” (2 Cor. 5:19).

*Now discern the Deity, Now His heavenly birth declare!
Faith cries out, 'Tis He, 'Tis He, My God that suffers there!'*

¹ Charles Wesley, “Hymn 21: God of Unexampled Grace”, *Hymns on the Lord’s Supper*, 1745.

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LITURGY OF THE PALMS

RCL Readings – Psalm 118;1-2;19-29; Luke 19:28-40

ACNA Readings – Luke 19:29-40; Psalm 118:19-29

Introduction. The different order in which the two readings are listed reflects different liturgical practices. The RCL lists them in the usual order with the Gospel reading last; but the ACNA follows the BCP Palm Sunday liturgical order, where the “Blessing of the Palms” – which is usually done outside the church and includes the reading of the Gospel account of the “triumphal entry” of Jesus into Jerusalem – is usually followed by a procession into or around the church during which Psalm 118 is recited or an equivalent hymn is sung.

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29. This Psalm is the last of the psalms known as the *Hallel* (= *Praise*, Psalms 113-118) which all end with Hallelujah! Similar to Psalm 116, it is a Psalm of praise for deliverance and victory. The RCL, by including verses 1 & 2, puts it in the context of thanksgiving.

This Psalm originally may not have been considered messianic, but the *Hallel* Psalms are recited during the Passover Seder before the final cup is drunk and the Seder is concluded. Matthew 26:30 tells us that Jesus and his disciples went out to the Mount of Olives “when they had sung a hymn.” So, almost certainly these words were in Jesus’ mind as he prayed in Gethsemane. Whether or not this Psalm was originally thought of as speaking of the Messiah, verse 22 and following were understood by the Apostles to be referring to Jesus. They are frequently quoted in the New Testament (e.g. Mat. 21:42, Mk. 12:10, 1 Pet. 2:7).

Luke 19:28-40. Jesus clearly planned this event. “The Lord needs it” (vv. 31 & 34) seems to have been a prearranged password. “There is an audacity about this whole procedure.”² Despite the threat of arrest by the Chief Priests and Pharisees, Jesus and his followers openly and defiantly enter the capital in kingly style.

The big question is who made up “the crowd”? Most likely they were Galilean pilgrims who had accompanied Jesus coming up to Jerusalem for Passover. They are the ones who had witnessed the miracles Jesus had done among them (37). According to Matthew, those inside Jerusalem were disturbed by the ruckus and had to ask, “Who is this?” (Matt 21:10) They probably were expecting Jesus to be the “Messiah ben David”, the King who would defeat the Romans, rather than “Messiah ben Joseph” who would suffer for the sins of his people, but Jesus was their hometown boy and very popular. Luke does not tell us whether the colt is the offspring of a horse or an ass, but the Greek word he uses for *colt*

² Leon Morris, *Luke: An Introduction and Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 277.

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(*pōlon*) regularly replaces the Hebrew word for *ass* in the LXX version of the Tanakh. The crowd recognized the fulfilment of Zechariah 9:9 with the prophecy of the King riding into his capital, but missed the part about his coming “gentle and riding on a donkey.” Verse 40 echoes Habakkuk 2:11 but in a different context.

THE PASSION OF OUR LORD

RCL Readings – Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 22:14-23:56 (or 23:1-49)

ACNA Readings – Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalm 22:1-11 (12-21); Philippians 2:5-11; Luke (22:39-71) 23:1-49 (50-56)

Introduction. Both the RCL and the ACNA allow for the shortening of the Passion Narrative but differ a little on how to do that. They both emphasize that the central events are the trial before Pilate, the crucifixion, and the death of Jesus.

Isaiah 50:4-9a. This short "Servant Song" is almost a soliloquy by the servant. But it foretells some of the things that Jesus endured in his passion (v. 6). It draws attention to the Servant’s determination to complete his mission (vv. 5-8), and to the assurance that the LORD will help him and vindicate him (vv. 7-9). The Servant is also aware of his mission to “sustain the weary” (v. 4).

Psalm 31:9-16. This Psalm is written by a man in deep distress who is seeking deliverance from the LORD. He asserts that all that he needs is for the LORD his God to let his face shine on his servant and to save him in his unfailing love (v. 16). The psalm ends in full confidence that God has heard his cry for mercy when he called to Him for help (v. 22).

Philippians 2:5-11. This passage from Paul’s letter to the Philippians is part of the Apostle’s appeal for unity in the church fellowship in Philippi. It is chosen here because of its focus on Jesus as God dying on a cross. In the first century, the spectre of a Roman cross was real, a frequent sight that spoke of utter humiliation and horror. But for a Jew, crucifixion was even more horrifying. It meant that the crucified one was under God’s curse and beyond any possibility of redemption (cf. Deut. 21:23).

There are a multiplicity of questions as to the authorship and date of this section of Philippians, as well as questions about the exact meaning of some of its words and phrases (e.g. “did not consider equality with God something to be grasped”, v.6 NIV). This discussion is beyond the scope of these notes, and readers should consult commentaries.

We should remember, however, that the writer of Philippians was Jewish, and so it must be understood in an “Older” Testament context. In this author’s opinion, it is an early hymn – whether composed by Paul himself or someone else – that is praising the Son’s acceptance of humiliation, suffering, and death as the pathway to exaltation and glory in willing obedience to his Father. By contrast, the first Adam chose to disobey and forfeited his position as the “son of God” (cf. Luke 3:38). My only worthy response is to bow my knee and confess Messiah Yeshua as Lord to the glory of God the Father (v. 11).

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Luke 22:14–23:56. The Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Last Passover Meal of Jesus and his disciples (22:14-38). The inclusion of the Passover Seder in the passion of Jesus is warranted by Jesus' statement in verse 15: "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer."

Was this meal a Passover Seder and whose chronology is correct, the Synoptists or John? There is an ongoing debate as to the chronology of the events from this meal to the death of Jesus because of the seeming conflict between the Synoptists' account and that of John.³ It appears from John 18:28 that the trial before Pilate was before the Passover Seder. This would mean that the "Last Supper" that Jesus and the disciples ate was earlier. One suggestion that has been made is that it was a Sabbath Eve fellowship meal which included the *Kiddush* ceremony of drinking wine and eating bread. But the order of partaking of the two elements (bread and wine) is different in the *Kiddush* and the Seder: In the *Kiddush*, the wine is drunk first and then the bread is shared. In the Seder, the "cup after the supper" is drunk after the eating of the final piece of bread, the *Afikoman*. It is beyond doubt that Luke and the other Synoptists present it as a Passover meal (v. 15). It is possible, however, that by the time Luke was writing, because of the similarity with the *Kiddush*, this remembrance was becoming a weekly observance rather than an annual meal.

This question is part of the bigger question of the apparent conflict between the Synoptists' account of the events of Jesus' passion and death and that of John. It is this author's contention that John, as is typical of Hebraic thinking, is much more interested in the meaning of events than in their chronology. John sets out to show that Jesus is the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" as John the Baptizer proclaimed him (John 1:29).

John presents the whole ministry of Jesus from his baptism to his dying breath as a reenactment of Passover. He replicates the choosing of the lamb for the sacrifice with the disciples responding to John the Baptizer's direction and choosing to follow Jesus (John 1:35-51; Exod 12:3). And the cleansing of the Temple at the outset (John 2:12-16) replicates the removal of the leaven (Exod 12:14-16). John may not actually describe a Seder as such, but he includes all the main elements of it: the ceremonial washing (13:1-17); the eating of bread (6:23-59) and to a degree the drinking of wine (2:1-11; 15:1-8). The final words of Jesus on the cross, "*It is finished*" (19:30) reflect the final act of a Seder, namely the drinking of the fourth cup, the "Cup of Completion". John's having Jesus on trial before Pilate and dying on the cross at exactly the time when the Passover lambs were being slaughtered in the Temple is quite consistent with his purpose, even if it does present some difficulties for us who, like the Greeks and Romans, want to know the correct chronological order of events!

³ Rodney A. Whitacre, *John*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 436ff, 454f.

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A full understanding of why Jesus died on the cross has to include both the fact that he is the *perfect* Atonement Sacrifice and the *true* Passover Lamb.

It is clear that Jesus deliberately did some things to fulfill prophecies (e.g. telling the disciples to get swords, vv. 36-38, cf. Is. 53:12), but there are many more that he could not have controlled (e.g. his side being pierced, John 19:34, cf. Isa 53:5).

Jesus in Gethsemane (22:39-46). Luke's account of Jesus' praying in the Garden is shorter than that of the other two Synoptists, but it shows the same struggle that Jesus went through when facing this momentous and time-changing event and his absolute obedience to his Father's will. It is worth noting that the literal meaning of Gethsemane is "oil press". The production of oil requires the crushing of the olive.

From the Garden to Pilate's Judgement Hall (22:47-7). Only Luke, "the doctor" mentions that Jesus healed the high priest's servant's ear, while John says that it was impetuous Peter that struck him and that the servant's name was Malchus. Luke does not mention that the disciples fled. Jesus speaks of himself as the "Son of Man", which in the light of Daniel 7:13 was regarded as more of a divine title than even "Son of God". Jesus is challenging Judas, who never called Jesus anything greater than "Rabbi" (cf. Matt 26:49, etc.). The guards who arrested and mocked Jesus belonged to the temple guards. Their commanding officer reported to the High Priest.

John tells us that there were informal examinations during the night before Annas and Caiaphas, whose whole purpose was to find a way to get the Romans to execute Jesus. The Sanhedrin did not have such a right under the occupation. A trial by night on a capital charge was unlawful, and the verdict could not be carried out till the day after the trial – to give time for recantation (cf. Mishnah, *Sanhedrin 4:1*). But they were in a hurry because of Passover. Luke takes up the story at daybreak when a legal meeting of the whole council could take place. The charge of blasphemy would satisfy the council, but not the Romans.

The trial before Pilate and Herod (23:1-25). Now the charge is sedition: that Jesus calls himself a king, and is opposed to the paying of taxes. Jesus seems to accept the title of King of the Jews, but when Pilate ridicules the idea that "King" Jesus could be a threat to Rome, the religious leaders charge Jesus with stirring up trouble for the Romans throughout the country. The mention of Galilee gives Pilate a possible way out from having to make a decision. Galilee was in the jurisdiction of Herod (Antipas), who was a puppet of the Romans. His soldiers were most likely Roman, so this was not Jewish people mocking Jesus.

In verse 13 we read, "Pilate called together the chief priests, the rulers and **the people**..." These people cry out relentlessly for Jesus to be crucified.

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Who are “the people”? In many congregations, the Passion Narrative is read as a drama, with members of the congregation being assigned roles – i.e. Peter, Jesus, Pilate, etc. It is usual, therefore, to make the congregation “the crowd”, who are at this point asked to voice the cry, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” Recall that a few minutes before, during the Liturgy of the Palms, the same people were waving palm branches and singing, “Hosanna to the King of Kings! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!” (Ps. 118:25f) It sounds like they are at one moment welcoming their Messiah, and shortly thereafter they are demanding that this Messiah be crucified! This has often fueled the accusation that the Jews are “Christ-killers”. Down through history, this charge has led to violent persecution of the Jews.

It is this author’s contention that the two crowds are entirely different. The Palm Sunday crowd are Galilean followers – Luke calls them “disciples” – of Jesus, their prophet and miracle worker (and King). The people gathered in Pilate’s judgement hall are a rent-a-mob assembled by the religious leaders, probably to a large degree Jews from the diaspora in town for the feast. They have little knowledge of who this Jesus is, except what their religious leaders tell them, namely that he is a blasphemer who is out to destroy their temple. Yes, that generation would suffer for rejecting their Messiah (cf. Luke 19:41-44). But the Jews as a people are no more or less guilty before God for the death of Jesus than are we all (cf. Acts 4:27; Rom 3:23, etc.). **Therefore, care should be exercised in how the story is told.**

The crucifixion, death and burial of Jesus (23:26-56). Where is “Paradise” (v. 43)? In Hebrew thought, it is the part of Sheol – the place where all of the dead are – reserved for the righteous (cf. Jesus’ parable in Luke 16:19-31). The place for the wicked is Gehenna (= Hell), which came from the Valley of Hinnom, where Jerusalem’s rubbish tip was and where a fire was always smouldering. Jesus declared to the criminal who recognized him as the Savior that he was destined to be with the righteous immediately after his death.

The curtain mentioned in verse 45 was the huge, thick curtain that hung between the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle and now in the temple. It effectively barred all but the High Priest – who could enter once a year on the Day of Atonement – from entering the near presence of God. There are records of this curtain being damaged during earthquakes, but Matthew tells us that this time the curtain was torn in two “from the top to the bottom” (27:51). This was God’s action demonstrating that through the death of his Son the way was open for all directly into his presence (cf. Heb 10:20).

Note how Luke honours women. Women were the last to leave the cross (v. 49), the ones who followed Joseph and Nicodemus to the tomb (v. 55f), and the first to receive news of the resurrection (v. 24:1-8). Friday is the ‘Preparation Day’ for the Sabbath, which begins Friday at sunset.

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ACNA Readings

Isaiah 52:13-53:12. This is the longest of the Servant Songs and is chosen here because it so precisely prefigures the suffering of Jesus. It reveals that the substitutionary death of the Servant is the very heart of God's plan of redemption. It is an interesting fact that verse 5 – “He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed” – is the middle verse of the whole Bible!

One of the most important questions of the Gospel message is: How can a holy God forgive a sinful people without compromising his holiness? The solution is shown forth here. The Servant is the atoning sacrifice with which God is completely satisfied. Unlike the animal sacrifice in the Mosaic covenant, however, the Servant continues to exist after his self-sacrifice; he rises from the dead (v. 11).

It is to be noted that this passage is not read in the Sabbath lectionary rotation in the synagogue. While it is true that not every part of the Tanakh outside of the Torah (the Five Books of Moses) is read in the Jewish lectionary, it seems that the omission of this passage is a deliberate rejection of Jesus as the Messiah by Jewish religious leaders.

Psalm 22:1-11 (12-21). “This Psalm may have been actually repeated word for word by our Lord when hanging on the tree; it would be too bold to say that it was so, but even a casual reader may see that it might have been. It begins with, “*My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*” and ends, according to some, in the original with “*It is finished.*”⁴

The psalm is attributed to David, but his hands and feet were never pierced (v. 16). David, therefore, is prophesying in detail the crucifixion of the Messiah a thousand years before it happened.

The Psalm ends, as do all the other readings today, with the vindication of the Servant and the full accomplishment of his mission. While what he suffered is appalling, it is not tragic. It is the pathway for him to achieve reconciliation between a holy God and his sinful creatures.

*Is He worthy? Is He worthy? Of all blessing and honor and glory. He is! He is! He is!*⁵

About the author. The Rev. Philip Bottomley is a “retired” Anglican priest. He is the Director of Ministry Partnerships of CMJ USA. Philip has a BA in Biblical Studies from St. John's College, Durham, England and a Diploma of Theology from Cranmer Hall Seminary, also in Durham. He served as the Midlands Area Director for CMJ UK from 1978-84 and was the first national director of CMJ USA from 1984-91. He is an assistant priest at Prince of Peace Anglican Church, Hopewell, near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

⁴ Charles H. Spurgeon, quoted by the Rev. David Roseberry in the Epigraph of *The Psalm on the Cross: A Journey to the Heart of Jesus through Psalm 22*, (Anglican Compass, 2021), 11.

⁵ Andrew Peterson, "Is He Worthy?," Centricity Music, 2018. YouTube video. <https://youtu.be/OIahc83Kvp4>