



Caught up in Celebration

A service for reflection for Sunday 28th March 2021

Palm Sunday

Introduction: Today is Palm Sunday. We remember how Jesus entered Jerusalem and was greeted by crowds. It was Passover time and the people were in a holiday mood. The crowds had seen and heard that Jesus was doing great things. They were caught up in celebration and already singing songs of praise to God. Our call to worship is based on Psalm 118 which would have been sung then.

Song: O Give thanks to God all you his people Worship Today 316

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yFge5RiJgEk>)

Prayer: Give thanks to the Lord, for God is good. **God's love endures for ever.**

This is the day that the Lord has made. **God's love endures for ever.**

I was pushed hard but the Lord helped me. **God's love endures for ever**

God has opened the way for the people. **God's love endures for ever.**

The rejected stone is in now holding the corner. **God's love endures for ever.**

Let all the people say: **God's love endures for ever.**

Amen.

Hymn Make way, make way for Christ the king Singing the faith 264

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tK6XuYhL7JI>

Video of Palm Sunday Saddle back kids

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-39h0xYqdE>

Reflection Part 1 – Caught up in celebration: Love wins

That little film is a fun way to celebrate the Palm Sunday events and remind ourselves what a crowd looks like.

We are a bit short on crowds at the moment, aren't we?

I miss being in a crowd although it isn't always comfortable. Think of the police arresting people in Myanmar or Hong Kong or even Bristol. Crowds can be risky but they can help to get things done.

Being caught up in a celebrating crowd can be a great thing. Think of Wimbledon Hill when Andy Murray was winning at tennis, or a football stadium when your team scores.

The crowds on that first Palm Sunday had something really good to celebrate.

Psalm 118, which they would have sung together as they arrived in Jerusalem, told the story of God being with them through hard times. It spoke of terrifying situations; of being surrounded; or experiencing rejection and then of God's salvation. Put simply, Psalm 118 told the story that **God wins**.

Or, as we might put it in more New Testament language: love wins. No matter how bad things get, no matter how defeated we look, **love wins**. And so at each visit to Jerusalem for a festival the people celebrated as they went up to the city.

And they were all the more excited on the occasion recounted in today's Bible passage because they had seen what Jesus was doing. He looked like the messiah. He looked like a great leader. They had a sense there was going to be a new kingdom of David.

And then Jesus seems to confirm this by riding on a mule just as their great king of yore, Solomon, had done as he went up to be crowned many years previously (1 Kings 1:32-48).

Also, about 200 years before Jesus the rebel leader Judas Maccabeus had led a rebellion against the Greek overlords of Israel and cleared the Temple of idols. Crowds had cut down branches to welcome him. So now they did the same for Jesus. And they generously threw down their precious coats as well. We get the message that here was something really good for them to celebrate.

It feels important to **notice this celebration** and to join in with those crowds. When I was a child in a dark austere Presbyterian church in NI Palm Sunday felt like one of the few really happy times at church along with harvest and the children's service at Christmas. Everything else was fairly miserable. So I would hope that today we can allow ourselves for a moment to get caught up in the celebration. Hence the cartoons, and lots of songs in this service!

But it is hard when we cannot gather together in our buildings.

No doubt today and through Easter time, we will feel the loss of our usual ways of celebrating. While things are getting better, they are not easy yet. Still, we may have much to give thanks for if we stop to think.

Perhaps you might take a few moments now to try and recall something in your life for which you are thankful. Perhaps there might be something for which, like the writer of Psalm 118, you are grateful and so you join with the singing crowds.

You don't have to sing though – maybe just complete the sentence "I want to give thanks for – or I would like to celebrate"

A minute or two for your own prayers of thanks

Song Hosanna, hosanna, hosanna in the highest *Singing the Faith* 263

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iG5y_Gd3oZ

Bible reading Mark 11:1-11 (Perhaps ask yourself the question Who is not getting caught up in celebration?)

11 As they approached Jerusalem, near the towns of Bethphage and Bethany, they came to the Mount of Olives. Jesus sent two of his disciples on ahead ² with these instructions: "Go to the village there ahead of you. As soon as you get there, you will find a colt tied up that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³ And if someone asks you why you are doing that, say that the Master^[a] needs it and will send it back at once."

⁴ So they went and found a colt out in the street, tied to the door of a house. As they were untying it, ⁵ some of the bystanders asked them, "What are you doing, untying that colt?"

⁶ They answered just as Jesus had told them, and the crowd let them go. ⁷ They brought the colt to Jesus, threw their cloaks over the animal, and Jesus got on. ⁸ Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches in the field and spread them on the road. ⁹ The people who were in front and those who followed behind began to shout, "Praise God! God bless him who comes in the name of the Lord! ¹⁰ God bless the coming kingdom of King David, our father! Praise be to God!"

¹¹ Jesus entered Jerusalem, went into the Temple, and looked around at everything. But since it was already late in the day, he went out to Bethany with the twelve disciples.

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Reflection 2: Who is not caught up in celebration?

No matter how well things are going it always seems that there are people who can't or won't celebrate. How should we respond? Our passage might guide us.

In Mark's gospel the end of the procession might seem something of an anti-climax. We are simply told that Jesus arrived at the Temple and went in and had a look around. Then he left for neighbouring Bethany. The suggestion that he did this because it was "late in the day" seems lame.

But if we remember that Jesus is staging something that looks like Solomon going up to be anointed, and everyone is expecting that, what doesn't happen makes a big point. For this time the Temple authorities do not anoint a new leader. In Mark's account they are conspicuous by their absence. The Temple priests and the religious leaders are definitely not caught up in celebration.

Their silence and absence is in sharp contrast to the great outpouring by the crowd. The people have seen how Jesus heals, teaches, and lives his life with love and concern for them. He is a great leader. They are excited.

By contrast, while the religious authorities are all too very well aware of Jesus, they keep away on this occasion. In modern days terms that might lead us to surmise that they are being "passive aggressive". That is killing the joy of another by absence or silence. When it happens, this is always a poor choice of response that means we miss out on developing understanding of difference and potentially solving problems.

Back with the passage we might also ask if Jesus himself is caught up in the celebration? He is certainly joining in as he has done in the synagogue and Temple through his life. At this festival though he is joining as the object of the crowd's joy and orchestrating it to some extent. He shows mastery over the situation with his sending of the disciples to fetch the colt – just as he will have a plan for the place they will celebrate the Passover. Jesus is at the centre of the celebration. But it is more than a celebration. It is a statement of intent. Jesus is on a mission.

In a careful way he is taking on the religious establishment. He is taking on the oppressors of the people. Having dealt quietly with provocations to his ministry in the past, and having walked away a time or two from crowds who want to stone him, Jesus is now purposefully walking towards the great showdown. He is taking his mission to the Temple where the religious leaders are in cahoots with the Roman and Herodian oppressors. Jesus is confronting them. He is taking on all the resistance to God, all the evil.

Today we might be wanting to ask about our time and place and who is not caught up in the celebration? As a nation we have just had the census and the *Guardian* newspaper predicts that this will show fewer than 50% of respondents will say that they are Christian. The paper suggests this is because the post-war generations regard the church as **irrelevant and immoral**. So sadly, 50% of our country are unlikely to want to join us in a celebration.

Now, there are many reasons why people might not feel like celebrating at the moment. There is much hurt and loss from our experiences of the pandemic. Many are weary, disappointed and tired and some continue to be unwell. Even

within ourselves in our churches there are differences and hurts and it might well be the same in families and among friendship networks.

In all this, I look again to Jesus. He held together celebration and mission. I believe that when we as churches take on the evils of poverty, hunger, selfishness, oppression, prejudice, (spiritual) ignorance and alienation, then we are relevant. We are real and we are moral. Then we have something to celebrate and others might want to celebrate with us. For because of Jesus, in all our hurts, love wins. There is nothing so bad or so broken that cannot be brought to wholeness. Because of God, love always wins. The message from Jesus's entry to Jerusalem is celebrate even in the face of sadness, keep on mission, because love always wins.

Song: Jesus Christ is waiting *Singing the faith* 251
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i72yd5L-bXM>

Lent ceremony written by Wendy Walker

Lent VI – Palms

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. **Mark 11: 1 - 11**

Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!
We are almost there, almost at Easter!
Hope stirs and stalks appear!
But first, the cross.

Before we dance with you in the joy of Resurrection,
We walk alongside you on your journey to the cross.

Together, we prepare to enter the city
as its people sing your praise one day
and call for your death the next.

But first, the colt.

You asked your disciples to untie a colt
that would carry you into Jerusalem.

And I wonder, what might you ask us to untie,
to untangle, to unwind, to deconstruct, to change, to challenge?
What do we need to let go of?

What might you ask us to untie as we carry you
into this world through our words
and our actions today?

Prayers for others

Today Lord in Myanmar the people are trying to change an oppressive government – may they be released from evil killing

Today Lord in Britain people are trying to get a fair chance at life and health – may there be equal opportunities for those poorer often forgotten cities in our land

Today Lord in our health service the staff are tired and drained – may there be healing and resourcing for all who have helped and are helping

Today Lord in poorer countries frightened people wait for the first vaccines to arrive – may our government share our supplies with densely-populated nations

Today Lord we have concerns for people we know who are unwell and those who have lost loved ones – may we release our fears and worries into your safekeeping

Today Lord we are churches tethered to the past with routines that help us feel secure but may exclude others – untie us within the safety of your mission that we may be on the move with you.

Untie, untangle, unwind, change us that we may walk with you through pain and darkness into the joy of your new kingdom. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

The Lord's prayer

Hymn Blessed be your name in the land that is plentiful *Singing the Faith 41*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tTpTQ4kBLxA>

Blessing/prayer

May the blessing of God,
the maker of day and night, grant us peace.

May the blessing of Jesus,
who rides to wild acclaim and waving palm branches,
grant us peace.

May the blessing of the Spirit,
who holds us through fears and nightmares,
grant us peace, and the hopes and dreams
of the dawning of an Easter Morning. **Amen.**

Service prepared by Roberta Topham drawing on material from *Singing the Faith CCLI 5560*, and from ©*Roots for Churches Ltd. (www.rootsontheweb.com)*, reproduced with permission. Lent ceremony written by Wendy Walker.