

**Save Us, We Pray and Other Loud Hosannas**  
(Luke 19:28-40)

On that day when he rode into Jerusalem I was there. He came down the path from the Mount of Olives sitting on that little donkey colt. His followers greeted him using the very words of our King David. "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord." But he didn't look like a king, no not at all. In fact, he looked rather silly, a grown man sitting on that poor little animal.

Looks are sometimes deceiving. I do recall hearing an amazing story about this donkey-riding fellow, although I can't say it's true. The report was that he had restored the sight of a blind man in Jericho. According to a witness, this blind man called him "The Son of David." If this were really true, I guess I would expect to see him riding into Jerusalem on a chariot pulled by stallions, instead of that pitiable donkey. But I know little of this man so who am I to judge.

I understand he is a Galilean, from a small and insignificant village called Nazareth. Some say he's the son of a carpenter named Joseph, and not the son of David. As he entered Jerusalem riding on that colt, the people seemed to think that this was a man who would be king, that he would soon be wearing a crown.

On that day when he rode into Jerusalem the people shouted "hosanna, hosanna." Now in my native Hebrew tongue this means: "Save us, we pray!" No doubt, he was received into Jerusalem as though he was about to become a king. If in fact he was not

already a king, these people seemed ready to crown him.

The people in the street waved palm branches, all the while shouting loud "hosannas." It was a curious way to receive this Galilean, I thought. You see, my people wave palm branches the way you wave your "stars and stripes." It's a patriotic gesture – a display of national pride and hope. Let me explain it this way. After the tragic events of your September 11<sup>th</sup> your nation expressed its pride and hope by flying your national flag.

On that first Palm Sunday, palm branches had a similar meaning for the nation of Israel. The people had lost all hope, having lived for years under the oppressive rule of Caesar and his prelates. This triumphal procession was a sign of hope that a powerful messiah, one anointed by God, would rise up to conquer our occupiers. It was the hope of a nation that this man would soon wear the crown of a conqueror.

On that day, when he rode into Jerusalem they could not have known that the only crown this man would wear would be made of thorns.

On that day when he rode into Jerusalem they could not have known that soon there would be nail marks in his hands. And so a nation sang loud hosannas to the long-hoped for king, saying, "Save us, we pray!" (and other loud hosannas). Please pray with me.

Redeemer God, the one who saves not by the sword but by

love, open our hearts and minds to the scripture read and the word proclaimed. Teach us the true meaning of the Passion Story as it begins to unfold before us, as we journey from the City of Palms through the valley of pain and death to arrive at Easter. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is reenacted by the church on Palm Sunday all over the world. As we sing our loud hosannas and wave our palm branches we portray a joyful and upbeat image as the king of kings finally arrives in the City of Palms. This is the image that floods our minds this morning on Palm Sunday. After all, Easter is only seven days away. The worship service is intended to set this tone, just as we did this morning with the joyfilled procession of the palms. Our children entered the sanctuary waving palm branches as we sang, "Hosanna, Loud Hosanna."

If we understand the deeper meaning of Palm Sunday, however, the hosannas on the lips of the children are really bittersweet words that foretell the beginning of six difficult days that include six very long hours of unfathomable agony. Hosanna, hosanna. "Save us we pray!" (and other loud hosannas).

In the festival-like prelude to Easter and the coming of spring our senses are filled with the sight of bright colored flowers, fragrant smells and the warmth of the sun as we emerge from the dark and cold of a long winter. On Palm Sunday we emerge from the austerity of Lent to the promise of Easter. It's like reaching a pinnacle with the summit still ahead.

But Friday looms large on the horizon in the immediacy of the days yet to come. The bright colors will turn into the blackness of the darkest night. The fragrant smells will become the aroma of death. Palm Sunday truly should be a most confusing day in the life of all Christians.

The only way we can get to Easter and the hope of the resurrection is to go through the week in between; through Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and the vigil of Holy Saturday. There is no shortcut. To get from the pinnacle of Palm Sunday to the summit of Easter we must descend into the valley of pain and death.

A good mountain climber always seeks the path of least resistance on the way to the summit. To descend into the valley below means expending valuable energy to regain elevation. So the smart climber shunts around the valley, never giving up any more elevation than necessary. When he arrives at the summit the climber has conserved energy and is well-rested – his cup is full, to use a Christian metaphor.

But God doesn't intend for us to follow the model of the climber. We must descend from the pinnacle into the valley of pain and death, sacrificing elevation. Then, on the other side of that valley we must climb all the way up to the summit. God expects us to be completely spent and emotionally drained when we arrive at Easter. On Easter Sunday morning our cup must be completely emptied.

There is a good reason for this expectation. You see, it's at the resurrection that our cup is filled. In order to understand and appreciate the transforming power of the resurrection our cup must be completely empty to make room for the full measure of God's

love. If our cup is not emptied then we can't experience the fullness of the resurrection. And the only way to empty our cup is walk with Christ through those six days.

These six days are packed full of emotion. There is anger as the temple is cleansed. Then sadness at the thought of leaving the disciples. And of course there is betrayal for thirty coins sealed with a kiss. There is also loneliness and doubt, guilt and humiliation, pain and suffering, frustration and finally death. Anger, sadness, betrayal, loneliness, doubt, guilt, humiliation, pain, suffering, frustration, and finally death! That's a lot of emotion to fill six short days.

We must experience the self-giving love of Jesus in the upper room as he shares the Passover with the disciples on Thursday night and then is betrayed. We must experience the self-emptying love of Christ as his human life is drained out on the cross. And finally, we must experience the darkest night of fear and uncertainty of the sealed tomb.

Betrayed, nailed to a cross, and sealed in a tomb. From our view on Palm Sunday we should see anger, sadness, betrayal, loneliness, doubt, guilt, humiliation, pain, suffering, frustration, and finally death! With this view we simply can't go from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday without experiencing these acts of self-giving, self-emptying love. It's in this way that we ourselves are emptied to make room to be filled up when we arrive at Resurrection Day.

I know I have painted a very grim picture of what began this morning as a triumphal celebration. So is there any good news on Palm Sunday that I can share with you? Where is the good news in the conflicting images of spring

breaking forth and the valley of pain and death that stretches out before us this morning? I believe there is good news on Palm Sunday. And interestingly enough, it also comes in another conflicting image: the music of the *Rolling Stones*. Mick Jaeger was more prophetic than he might have ever realized when he sang:

*You don't always get what you want, but ... you just might find, you get what you need.*

*You get what you need!* The crowd that came to welcome Jesus to Jerusalem expected, that is to say, wanted a powerful messiah, a conquering king. The nation of Israel had been waiting for a long-expected king that would rise up a great force and crush the Romans, driving them from Palestine. They didn't get what they wanted, but they did get what they needed.

They wanted a revolutionary freedom fighter, but got a peacemaker who taught his followers to turn the other cheek. They wanted a sword-wielding warrior riding a chariot, but got a pastor on a lowly donkey armed only with a kind word. They wanted a conquering hero, but they got a suffering servant.

Jesus didn't come to Jerusalem in the name of a nation to be a political leader. He really did come in the name of Lord as a savior. The good news on Palm Sunday is that God didn't give the people what they wanted. God, in Jesus Christ, gave us precisely what we needed – a Savior for all times.

This is true for us even today. It happens to us when we least expect it, we get what we need when our prayers are answered. When we least expect it

God breaks into our lives to give us what we need, whether we realize it or not. Like the crowd in Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday we go through our lives worshipping, praying, singing hymns, and beckoning to God: "Save us, we pray!" (and other loud hosannas). And then, just like on that first Palm Sunday, when we least expect it, the one who can truly save us comes into our lives, whether we realize it or not.

The hosannas of Palm Sunday are transformed into the alleluias of Easter. But just like our hosannas are hollow, so can our alleluias be hollow if we don't take that pilgrim walk with Christ through the valley of pain and death. The good news on Palm Sunday is that God gives us what we need – the Passion of Christ – to empty our souls completely so that on Easter Sunday we can experience the fullness of the awesome power of having died with Christ and then to be raised with Christ.

Resist the temptation to go from Sunday to Sunday and skip the events of the week in between. Come and taste the self-giving love of Jesus on Thursday as we come to the table as a community united by that love. Come and experience the self-emptying love of Christ on Good Friday evening in a darkened sanctuary. Come and feel the sting of death and the sadness of loss.

On Holy Saturday participate in the prayer vigil and take time to reflect on the hopelessness of the sealed tomb and to cry out one last time to the Lord, "Save us we pray!" (and other loud hosannas). Dare to descend with Jesus and walk into the valley of pain and death. Know what it feels like to emerge on the other side of that valley, to be completely emptied, but now ready to experience the fullness of God's love as

you rise with Christ to the summit on Easter Sunday.

Come to the resurrection with your cup empty. Ask that your cup be filled as you experience the fullness of the resurrection. And your cup will be filled to overflowing with the awesome self-emptying love of God. This is all you need!