

**May I speak in the name of the living God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.**

For the next few minutes I would like you all to hold the Palm cross you were given as you arrived this morning. Feel it in your hand. Look at it.

Today is the day when we remember Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem. The crowds are cheering, the hymns of praise rise up to meet him and there is an atmosphere of celebration.

The disciples and the crowds may well have been thinking that despite all of Jesus' hints and predictions, everything would be alright in the end. Perhaps the people would accept Jesus. Perhaps there would be no need for him to make that final journey to the cross.

When we read the section in the Gospels describing Jesus entry into Jerusalem and the jubilant crowds, it really does seem that things are going to work out ok. Everything happens as it should. The colt is where it should be and when the owner asks what the disciples are doing their answer that it is for the Lord seems to be enough. When this procession of Jesus with his followers gets to the city, it is met by crowds of people who have seen Jesus perform miracles and they greet him as their Saviour. They believed that - here at last was the king who would set them free.

And yet we know different.

We don't come to this Palm Sunday with the same feelings as the disciples. The disciples must have been ecstatic. Just a day earlier Jesus was talking about being anointed for burial when Mary covered his head with expensive perfume but here they are entering the capital city, the seat of power and the crowds are cheering and calling Jesus their king.

Of course we bring hope and anticipation to the beginning of Holy Week, this most important week in the Christian year, because we know the story. We know that things will work out o.k. in the end, but we also know that the journey of this week will not be one of triumph and glory.

Holy Week, the journey to the cross, is one of darkness and despair, of betrayal and denial. That journey from hope to utter despair and agony back to triumph and glory is one which we must share if we are to have any kind of understanding of the salvation Jesus offers.

The people of Jerusalem, the Jews, were a nation born out of slavery. They were the descendents of the Hebrew slaves, freed from Egypt by God and led through the desert to the Promised Land by Moses. The Jews thought that Jesus was going to free them from the Romans. They thought that they would be masters of their own destiny once more. ***Hosanna!*** They shouted. ***He saves!*** That's what Hosanna means.

And they don't seem to understand that Jesus wasn't that kind of Saviour, even when he arrived at the capital city riding on a borrowed donkey. Jesus wasn't dressed in armour or riding a great black stallion, he wasn't calling the people to arms and he hadn't even said anything about the Romans.

The people had been dazzled by miracles and wonders. They believed in Jesus' power, but hadn't been listening to his message. They didn't understand what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. They didn't understand the kind of freedom Jesus had come to offer. Not even the disciples understood it. They still didn't realise where this journey would end.

As we heard in our reading of the Passion Narrative this morning... How quickly the cries of ***'Hosanna'*** ***turn to 'crucify him!'***. How quickly the euphoria of the Palm Sunday parade turns to a group of scared men and women hidden away in a locked room, celebrating a Passover meal.

In just a few short days Judas would become disenchanted with the dream and sell God's Son for a few silver coins.

In just a few short days Peter, the rock on which Jesus would build the church, denies even knowing him, not once but three times.

In just a few short days Jesus would go from triumphant king to crucified criminal.

In a real sense then, Palm Sunday is the light before the darkness. The lull before the storm.

We turn our palm branches into crosses because we represent the crowd. We represent the ones who welcomed Him with shouts of Hosanna, palm branches waving, and a week later nailed Him to that cross. And yet, all along, Jesus knew that this was the only way.

His death on the cross was the only way He could defeat the power of evil and death forever.

Holy Week is so important to our faith. If we miss out the next seven days we jump straight from this Palm Sunday, this day when we welcome Jesus with songs of joy, and we jump straight to Easter Sunday when we will welcome the risen Christ with glad hearts. But to miss out the journey in between is to miss the whole point of the story.

Today, we enter the gates of Jerusalem and hear the noise of the crowd as we stand among them and hear the Pharisees challenge Jesus even then.

During this week, we will journey through the dark days ahead to the upper room where the disciples share a final meal with Jesus and are then lead out to the garden of Gethsemane where they fall asleep through exhaustion and fear.

We will stand in the shoes of Judas as he betrays the man he has spent three years with;

We will put on the cloak of Peter as he denies even knowing Jesus three times;

And we will join with the Pharisees as they condemn Jesus to death.

Without this week, this journey from light into darkness and back into light, our faith means little.

There can be no resurrection if there is no crucifixion. There is no eternal life, if God's son does not die. There can be no forgiveness if there is no wrong done.

In making this journey together, I believe that we will discover much about Jesus, about ourselves and we will gain fresh insights into the grace of God.

Grace is the thing that transforms our understanding of things. Grace is love that is undeserved and way out of proportion.

Grace is something that the world finds hard to understand or accept.

The Good News of Jesus Christ is grace.

As we journey through this week we have the opportunity to rediscover the amazing truth that we are loved way beyond what we deserve. We are loved way beyond what we can return. We are loved no matter who we are or what we have done. Grace is what this Holy Week is all about. Grace overcomes the darkness of our betrayals, our denials and our crucifixions of God's will in our lives.

This Holy Week and Easter – may we rediscover the depth of God's love, and in turn renew our love from him. Amen.