

The Sunday Gospel

Palm Sunday

(Lectionary Year A) Matthew 21:1-11

About today:

On Palm Sunday we enter Holy Week by holding together two contrasting scenes.

First, Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Matthew 21:1-11): he comes not on a warhorse or a chariot but on a donkey, fulfilling the prophecy of a humble king who brings peace. The crowds recognise something of his kingship as they spread cloaks and branches before him and cry, "Hosanna to the Son of David!"

Then, in the Passion (Matthew 26:14-27:66), the tone shifts dramatically. The same city that welcomed Jesus now rejects him. We hear of his betrayal, the Last Supper, the agony in Gethsemane, the trial, and the crucifixion. In the figure of the suffering Christ we see the depth of God's love: a Messiah who refuses violence, who remains obedient even unto death, and who bears our sin and sorrow.

These two movements – hosannas and the cross – frame our journey into Holy Week. They invite us to recognise Christ as our true king, to follow his path of humility, and to walk with him through the mystery of his Passion towards the new life of Easter.

Gospel Reading

Read the whole passage slowly a few times, keeping one or two minutes of silence between each time.

^{21:1} When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples,

² saying to them, “Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me.

³ If anyone says anything to you, just say this, ‘The Lord needs them.’ And he will send them immediately. ”

⁴ This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

⁵ “Tell the daughter of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them;

⁷ they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them.

⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

⁹ The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

¹⁰ When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, “Who is this?”

¹¹ The crowds were saying, “This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Broader Picture:

Matthew 21 marks a decisive shift and the triumphal entry is the gateway into the Passion and Resurrection narratives. From this point forward (chapters 21–28), the Gospel’s pace slows dramatically.

Right before entering Jerusalem, Jesus heals Bartimaeus (20:29–34) and teaches about servant leadership. These themes converge in the entry scene:

- Jesus comes as King, yet in humility,
- to bring sight to the blind (both physically and spiritually),
- and to redefine kingship through humility.

Immediately after this passage, Jesus cleanses the Temple (21:12–17) and begins a series of confrontational debates with Pharisees, scribes, and chief priests. The “Hosanna!” of the crowd stands in contrast with the rising hostility of the authorities, setting the stage for the Passion.

Interpretation Notes:

v. 1: “*When they had come near Jerusalem...*” God’s saving work unfolds through Christ’s deliberate choice to enter the place where he will be handed over. The Incarnation moves toward the Cross.

Saint Augustine of Hippo interprets this scene as the beginning of the Passion: Christ willingly walking toward suffering, not as victim but as sovereign.

v. 2: “*...you will find a donkey tied...*” Saint John Chrysostom emphasises Jesus’ foreknowledge: he knows exactly what the disciples will find, showing divine authority even in apparent humility.

But there another narrative element which is even more striking (at least in its interpretation): the choice of animals. Origen interprets the donkey and colt allegorically: the older animal represents Israel under the Law; the colt, the Gentiles not yet “ridden” by Christ. Christ gathers both into his

kingship which it is both gentle and universal. He claims both Israel and the nations.

v.3: “...*The Lord needs them...*” This is a pretty straightforward and practical request though, theologically, it makes a profound point: the Lord who created all things “needs” a borrowed animal; the Creator enters his city not with splendour but in poverty and borrowed things. This expresses the humility of the Word made flesh.

vv. 4-5: “...*to fulfil what had been spoken...*” The Church Fathers frequently emphasise Christ as the fulfilment of prophecy, and here we find a direct quotation from Zachariah 9 in which the King enters Jerusalem just as Jesus does here.

St Augustine reads “*humble and riding on a donkey*” as the antidote to Adam’s pride; Christ’s humility begins the reversal of the Fall.

vv. 6-7: “...*did as Jesus had directed them...*” The disciples do not question Jesus about his extraordinary command – to go to an unknown person and borrow their colt and donkey as if everything had been pre-arranged. St John Chrysostom notes that the disciples’ obedience mirrors the obedience of creation to its Lord.

The cloaks placed on the animals are a practical gesture for a more comfortable ride and they interpreted as a sign of honouring the King.

v.8: “...*spread their cloaks on the road...*” Matthew paints the image of a very large crowd (and then crowds!) who welcome Jesus to the Holy City as the King. St Augustine notes that the crowd symbolises humanity’s instinctive longing for a true king, even if the understanding is incomplete.

The act of spreading the cloaks on the road signifies submission to the King and it links this narrative to Israel’s royal history. In 2Kings, Jehu is unexpectedly anointed king by Elisha and, on hearing the news, the people around him spread their cloaks on the ground so that his feet would not touch the bare earth.

¹¹ When Jehu came back to his master's officers, they said to him, "Is everything all right? Why did that madman come to you?" ... he said, "This is just what he said to me: 'Thus says the Lord, I anoint you king over Israel.'" ¹³ Then hurriedly they all took their cloaks and spread them for him on the bare steps; and they blew the trumpet, and proclaimed, "Jehu is king." (2Kings 11:-13)

v.8: "...others cut branches from the trees..." Matthew does not mention palms (!), but only branches from unspecified trees. It is on the gospel of John which identifies the type of tree as palms, which consequently gives the name of today's celebration. The key is greenery as a symbol of welcome, honour, and victory, not the specific species.

v. 9: "...Hosanna to the Son of David!" Hosanna means "Save, we pray," a plea rather than a mere cheer. So, as the crowds chant "Save us, Son of David!" they recognise him as the Messiah, true King of Israel, even though the nature of his saving mission remains hidden.

As soon as their expectations are not met, the crowds Hosannas will turn into "Crucify Him!" – revealing humanity's instability.

v. 10-11: "...The whole city was in turmoil..." The word "turmoil" also points us towards the fact that the arrival of Jesus in such triumph challenges established power.

Jerusalem trembles because the true King enters a city that does not know fully know him. Saint Cyril of Jerusalem notes that the crowd names him by his humanity and earthly origin, failing to recognise his divine sonship, which can only be known by faith.

A side note: Why Palms?

By the 4th century, Christian communities in Jerusalem physically reenacted the entry with palms, as described by the pilgrim Egeria. This practice spread throughout Christendom.

The official title in the Roman rite became: *Dominica in Palmis*, “Sunday of the Palms.” Thus, tradition fixed the symbol even when the biblical text is broader.

As noted in verse 8, Matthew speaks of “*branches from the trees.*” Indeed, only John specifies palm branches.

The use of palms is historically likely even if mentioned by only one evangelist. In Judea, date palms were plentiful in the Jordan Valley and around Jericho. Palms were available, though maybe not the only greenery.

However, in John’s case there is more to the narrative than just an historical insight. Palms carry royal, theological, and festal significance:

- In Leviticus 23:40, palms are part of the materials used in the Feast of Tabernacles – a feast celebrating God’s kingship and presence.
- In I Maccabees 13:51, palms symbolise the victory and purification of the Temple.
- In Revelation 7:9, the saints in heaven hold palm branches in victory.

More specifically, the connection to the Feast of Tabernacles (or Sukkot) is key for what John wants to say about Jesus. This celebration remembers God dwelling with Israel in a tent. On this feast Israel is commanded to take “*branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook...*” to build booths, or tabernacles, recalling the time spent in the wilderness toward the promised land.

By using palms Jesus is identified as the New Tabernacle, the new dwelling place of God with his pilgrim people – a concept John sets out at the beginning of his gospel: “*And the Word became flesh and lived (literally ‘tabernacled’) among us*”.

The UK does not naturally grow palms, so the Church traditionally imported them or substituted:

- Yew branches (common in medieval England)
- Willow (“pussy willow”), especially in Northern Europe
- Olive branches in Mediterranean countries
- Boxwood in France and Germany

All of these are accepted liturgical substitutions.

Questions for this week:

- *Christ’s Humble Kingship.*
Where in my life do I resist the humility of Christ’s kingship because I prefer strength, control, or recognition?
- *The crowd honours Jesus with branches and cloaks.*
What in my own life could I “lay down” as a sign of welcome, surrender, or reverence?
- *The same crowd that cries Hosanna will soon cry Crucify him.*
When have I welcomed Christ with enthusiasm but turned away when his way became costly?
- *Palms evoke the Feast of Tabernacles and the truth that God “dwells among us.”*
How does knowing I am a pilgrim with God reshape my fears or my priorities?

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Notes by Father Diego Galanzino for *The Sunday Gospel* – A discipleship group of the Parish of All Saints' Houghton Regis, March 2026. allsaintshr.co.uk/learning