

*“The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!’ And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written, ‘Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt!’ His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him. The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to bear witness. The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had done this sign. So the Pharisees said to one another, ‘You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him.’”*

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

Prayer, praises and palm branches. That sums us the events we remember today. In contrast to the mournful, penitential days of Lent, we look forward to this day, to Palm Sunday, and the opportunity to praise our Lord as the crowds praised Him on that day so many years ago. We add our prayers to theirs, and with our palms we welcome Him who comes in the name of the Lord to bring life and salvation to His people.

There is a great deal of difference between our view of Palm Sunday and that of the people who were in the vicinity of Jerusalem on that day so many years ago. You and I can look back at the whole of Scripture to see the big picture and understand what was happening that day. But, as John confesses in our text, it wasn’t until after the resurrection that the disciples themselves began to understand what had happened in their presence. There was so much that has happened for the disciples and for Jesus in the few weeks before our text. Only a few days before Palm Sunday, Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. This was quite the event, since it happened in Bethany, a suburb of Jerusalem. Lazarus was well known. Many people had come to mourn his death, and were dumbfounded when Jesus revealed His glory in raising Lazarus to life. All the excitement around this event brought a response from the chief priests and Pharisees, who plot to put Jesus to death. It is because of this that Jesus withdraws to the town of Ephraim until shortly before the Passover. Now, just six days before Passover Jesus returns to the home of Lazarus and Martha and Mary. Lazarus had become something of a celebrity since Jesus raised him from the dead, and word spread quickly that Jesus was visiting with the family again. That was enough to attract the thrill seekers and the celebrity hounds who had come up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Then, on Sunday morning as Jesus begins his final journey to Jerusalem, a crowd from Bethany follows Him, and a larger crowd from Jerusalem comes out to meet Him. As they journey with Jesus down the road the excited crowds, palm branches in hand, cry out: *“Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!”*

What’s it all about, these prayers and praises and palm branches? For many of the people, they are just swept up in the excitement, carried along by a mob mentality. But behind it all, God is doing some great and wonderful things. One of them has to do with the prayer of the people, a simple prayer that comes through in one word: hosanna. The word hosanna means, “save us, we pray”. Many commentators have pointed out that the word had become a simple shout of praise, much like our “hurrah!” And yet, that word had also been a part of a prayer that God would, from the highest heaven, make known His salvation in connection with the Son of David, the messiah in whom Israel hoped. Whether they realized it or not, the people that day were praying the most basic and the most important of prayers: “save us, Lord”. Even as the people shouted out their hosannas, God was answering that prayer. After all, the One who was coming to Jerusalem on that donkey colt was the One who came to be the Saviour of the world, the one who came to give His life to save all people from sin, death and hell.

There were also the praises of the people: *“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!”* This was the very thing that the chief priests and Pharisees were so worried about, that the people somehow believed that Jesus was the messiah who was to come. For most of the Jews, the messiah was an earthly king who would restore the glory days of Israel under King David. Over the years, Jesus’ reputation has grown as people heard more and more about His miracles and the authority with which He spoke. With the raising of Lazarus—well, Jesus has to be the Messiah. Only the Messiah could have power over death itself. If He could raise Lazarus, who had been dead and buried for 4 days, surely He was the One who would be able to set them free from their Roman oppressors and restore the kingdom of David.

And finally, there were the palm branches. For the Jews, the palm tree represented the perfect tree. It was everything a tree

should be. It was able to survive in this arid land, and to bear fruit that was refreshing and life-giving. It was a majestic tree, with its branches reaching up into heaven. Palm trees were known to live for 200 and more years and so they became symbols of life and salvation as well as symbols of triumph and joy. It was natural to use them as part of a victory celebration, as we would wave flags or baseball pennants.

Prayer, praise and palms. This is the way that the people of Jerusalem welcomed the Saviour that day. Yet the Saviour who came to Jerusalem that day was not the Saviour that they were expecting. He was the Saviour that they needed. He is the Saviour that we need, too!

In answer to the prayers of those people—and in answer to all the prayers of sinful mankind, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords sets aside His glory and majesty, and rides into Jerusalem on a donkey colt. He comes to fulfill the plan and purpose of God and to give His own life on the cross as a ransom for sin. He comes to bring life and salvation; to bring complete and total deliverance for all who trust in Him. In the midst of all the needs of this life, we need to turn to our God in prayer and seek His help and strength. We need pray, “Lord, save us!” The problem is that we often have our own idea of how we expect God to act for us. When we hear the crowds shout out: **“Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!”**, what were their expectations? For many people, the thing that troubled and concerned them the most was the fact that they were not truly a free nation. They were an occupied country, and they wanted a king who would save them from the oppression of Roman rule. For many, that was all that mattered. That is all the messiah had to do. He would get rid of the Romans and restore the Kingdom of David, bringing back the good old days. They wanted a charismatic political leader. They wanted autonomy, but they also wanted peace and prosperity—and they thought Jesus could deliver it.

Maybe we are concerned about the things like government. No, we aren’t living under an oppressive regime; it just feels that way sometimes. Maybe we, too, long for the good old days - but what does that mean? The days of John Diefenbaker? The days of Mackenzie King or Lester Pearson? We do need to pray that God would bless us with good leaders and good government, because we do have many concerns in this world, from health care to terrorism, from taxes to the deficit. We want a land that we can be proud of, and a country where we live in peace and prosperity. We want a land where we do not honour the immorality that is pushed by so many, but a land that stands up for what is truly right in the sight of God. Yet even if all our expectations would be met, this wouldn’t answer our greatest need.

There are so many things that overwhelm us in this sinful world. We struggle with illness and failing health. The fear that we feel when the doctor says that bitter word, “cancer” just drains us. There seems to be so much that we just can’t deal with anymore. Maybe you are struggling with your relationships with your family and friends; maybe you are concerned about the future, which you feel is so bleak. Perhaps you are confronted by the grim reality of death, because someone you know has died; maybe you are worried about your own death. We want a messiah who can meet all these needs.

My dear people, loved by God, your Messiah is all this—and so much more! The good news of Palm Sunday is that our God does hear our prayers. Jesus is the answer to all those prayers, and more. Of course, He came to answer those prayers God’s way and in accordance with God’s plan. As God says through the prophet Isaiah: **“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”** (Isaiah 55:8-9, ESV) The Messiah was not what the people expected. His coming did not bring a change to the government of His day, nor did He heal every person in Israel. He came to deliver us from something worse than the difficulties of this world. He came to save us from the sin that would condemn us for all eternity.

In less than a week, the cheering crowd would turn into a taunting, jeering mob calling for his death. The chief priests and Pharisees wanted Jesus dead because they were jealous of Him, but that isn’t why He died. He died to save His people from death. He came to give His own life for us. His life was free from the sin, the selfishness, the wickedness that clings to us and shows itself in us in so many ways. He came to take upon Himself our lies, our lusts, our hates, our apathy, and suffer the punishment that we rightly deserve for those things and the countless other evil things we do against God and against one another each day. Jesus died on a cross in our place, to save us from sin and its power. Then, as victor over sin and the devil, He also rose again from the dead and destroyed even death. Now we need never fear the future. In Christ, our future is certain. We have been and will be saved. We will have life with God in the perfect kingdom, in perfect joy and happiness, in perfect peace that lasts for all eternity.

St. Paul tells us: **“If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.”** (1 Corinthians 15:19, ESV) If our messianic expectations are only for this life, we have lost what we really need. Yes, our Lord does care about our worldly needs. Again, it is Paul who assures us: **“He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also**

***with him graciously give us all things?***” (Romans 8:32, ESV) He does save us when we cry for help in the hospital, by healing or by giving us strength to endure, assuring us that we have life with Him forever. He does save us from our loneliness, as He fills us with His glorious presence. He does save us from the struggles of life as He provides for us, as He leads us to help and care for one another. But He, who knows we are lost without His gracious deliverance has truly answered the prayers and praises of His people, giving His life in our place, but also rising to give us life through His life forevermore. That is the Saviour we truly, truly need! Amen.