

Palm/Passion Sunday 2009  
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What an amazing service this is. The breadth is almost breath taking. We begin outside with the liturgy for Palm Sunday and then end with the Passion reading. One almost wants to say enough already.

The great challenge is that this liturgy is an attempt to pack all of Holy Week into just two Sundays, today and Easter morning. Unpacking all of this is an impossible task so do not fear I will not try to explain it all in the next few minutes. This is why we have Holy Week.

The services of Holy Week as we have reinstated them in the Book of Common Prayer come from the time of Constantine. The records we have come from a pilgrim whose name was Egeria. Egeria was a nun who recorded her experience of a pilgrimage for the Holy Week services and located in Jerusalem. Holy Week in Jerusalem was designed as a teaching tool for the many new converts to Christianity. This was sort of a Vacation Bible School for adults if you will. Pilgrims to Jerusalem would re-enact the biblical story starting on Palm Sunday and moving to what is formally known as the Tridium, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and the Great Vigil of Easter, which began at sundown on Saturday and ended with the first Eucharist of Easter at sunrise. Pilgrims like Egeria took these traditions back to their own churches and the practice spread.

So rather than pack all the teaching into today, I will simply invite you, like those ancient pilgrims to come and walk the way throughout this week.

There are a few things I want us to consider regarding Palm Sunday itself.

The theme that this year's Lenten sermons have evolved into is one of looking at what we have always done and ask, is this what we are called to do. This theme is about accepting that God may be doing something new and unexpected.

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem certainly qualifies as the unexpected. First of all he was already unpopular with the temple leadership and to come walking in the front door as if to say, "Here I am. Come and get me," is unexpected and certainly unwise if he really wished to live to old age.

One aspect that is striking is that there seems to have been a great deal of planning to this entrance. I don't imagine a random group of people magically showed up to welcome him. I can't imagine that he hadn't made arrangements for the donkey ahead of time. I'm too much of J for that. The branches had to

come from somewhere and there would not have been many to be had in the city. Most of the trees were outside the city walls.

The entrance is staged as that of a king entering into his capital after a great battle. There is a significance to the branches and cloaks being strewn on the ground. This was a common practice based on the state of the Roman roads. The roads were made often of large paving stones and were for the transport not of people but of baggage and supplies. Initially the roads allowed the army to send out supplies in advance of the forces. The stone roads provided a secure way to transport advance supplies during the rainy season when dirt roads would be impassable. The army would then follow traveling on the side of the road when the mud was gone. Baggage trains travel much slower than foot soldiers, chariots or cavalry. The roads however made a rough ride for a chariot and not great footing for horses. The tradition of the cloaks and palm branches on the road were to soften the ride of the chariot for the king and were a sign of his position of honor.

So all of these preparations are made and yet Jesus arrives on a donkey! This was not what had been prepared for. Monty Python could have been the director for this rather absurd staging. A donkey was the means of travel for a person of modest means. A donkey is also what a king would ride on when he entered a city caring a message of peace. That is something I had never heard, but found in several commentaries after doing some further research. So rather than the military leader come to over through the Romans, Jesus arrives with a symbol of peace. This certainly is not what they expected from someone of David's line.

Finally in what seems a mystifying scene Jesus walks into the temple looks around and then leaves town for the night. He will return in the morning for the famous cleansing of the temple, but it seems so strange that he makes the very public entrance, looks around and then leaves again.

The power of today is that within minutes today we move from proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah to crying crucify him. In essence this is what happens in Holy Week. Jesus enters as king, is crucified as a criminal and then rises from the dead on Easter and begins a new chapter in the world. This is too much to absorb in just a few minutes. This overwhelms us in this short span of time.

The key is that if we do not walk the full walk, we do not give God the time to do something new, something unexpected in our lives. So I end as I began by making the invitation to all of you to walk all of Holy Week, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, the Vigil of Easter and Easter morning.