

Palm Sunday – 9 April, 2017 at St Paul’s Manuka.**Preacher: The Venerable Dr Brian Douglas****Isaiah 50: 4-9a****Psalms 118: 1-2, 19-29****Philippians 2: 5-11****Matthew 21: 1-11**

Have you ever made a grand entrance? Maybe to a party or to some other social function. You know the sort of thing. You arrive late, after everyone else, wearing something outrageous or behaving in a most unusual manner. Everyone stops what they are doing, turns and for a moment looks at you with their mouths wide open. You walk in feeling the centre of attention, but after a while everyone gets on with the serious business of partying and forgets all about your grand entrance. But you did make their heads turn and look, even if it was for just a moment.

Jerusalem has seen many grand entrances over the years. Some were grand at the time but have been mostly forgotten. Others not so grand are better remembered.

Early in the twentieth century the king or Kaiser of Germany (Kaiser Wilhelm II) made a grand entry to Jerusalem at the time of his visit. When the Kaiser entered the holy city of Jerusalem for the first time he was mounted on a beautiful white stallion and instead of going through one of the gates of the city he had a new entrance chopped through the walls so that his entrance was unique. He rode on his magnificent white stallion, dressed in full military uniform and heads turned to look. He made quite an impression at the time. It was truly a grand entrance.

How different was Jesus’ entrance to Jerusalem. Instead of a beautiful white stallion Jesus rode on a small insignificant donkey. Instead of a full military uniform Jesus wore his ordinary clothes. Instead of entering by a unique gap in the wall Jesus entered by one of the ordinary and crowded gates.

The Kaiser’s entrance was that of a conqueror. It was triumphal with much pomp and ceremony.

Jesus entry to Jerusalem was plain and simple, but some cheered and waved the branches they had broken from the palm trees. Others tried to make it a bit more dignified by laying their coats on the ground in front of the donkey.

How different they were – these two entries and these two people. Jesus' entry has been remembered for two thousand years but not the Kaiser's, except in some remote history book. Jesus' entry has been celebrated each year at this time – but not the Kaiser's. It is remarkable that the simple and ordinary has been remembered and the grand and extraordinary has not.

Why should such a grand entrance be forgotten and such a simple one remembered?

The events of Palm Sunday are remembered because they are part of what is probably the most remarkable week in the history of the world. That week, which begins today and extends through Holy Week to Good Friday and Easter Day is a holy week. Palm Sunday leads us to the events of that holy week just as Jesus was led into Jerusalem and to the events that awaited him. Palm Sunday leads us to the death of Jesus on Good Friday and his resurrection on Easter Day. Palm Sunday begins for us a journey of death which is transformed into new life. Christians have been treading this path for more than two thousand years. Our readings in the Gospel passages over the last few weeks have helped us to focus on that journey towards the power of Christ. Nicodemus came enquiring, the Samaritan woman entered into a journey of understanding and the blind man experienced the power of God in Christ's healing. Lazarus last week journeyed with Jesus from death to new life and his rising from the dead points us forward to the new life of Easter.

Jesus enters Jerusalem and people cheer, waving palms and calling shouts of welcome to a king. We have the chance to walk with Jesus. That is why we wave our palms and walk around the church – to enter in a concrete way to the journey of Jesus, just like those others we have read about have done. Our actions are not just nice things to do without any real meaning – they point us to the events of Easter and help us to walk with Jesus.

Jesus enters Jerusalem and the people cheer. A few days later the same people are putting Jesus to death using one of the cruellest forms of execution yet devised by the minds of people.

And then three days later Jesus rises from the dead. By that rising to new life Jesus brings us the promise of new life and new hope, both here and now and after our human death.

Grand entries can be so temporary. They last for a moment and then they are forgotten and gone.

The muted triumph which Jesus experienced on that first Palm Sunday when people proclaimed him a king, was soon replaced by opposition, intrigue, betrayal and desertion by close friends, and finally suffering and the darkness of death.

If this is all it is then it is clear that Jesus' enemies had the victory. If that was all then his mission on earth was ended and the darkness prevailed.

But the seeming triumph of Jesus' enemies is only temporary. God took a much bigger part in the events of the holy week than anyone realised. God chose people and circumstances and used them in ways that human thought found hard to imagine. When God got involved things were changed for ever.

God raised Jesus from the dead. Something his enemies and perhaps even some of his friends had never imagined would happen. The kingly triumph we so fleetingly glimpse as Jesus rides into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, becomes the permanent reality of salvation history as Jesus becomes the king of heaven. Jesus rises from the dead bringing new life for him and for us for ever. The darkness of death and suffering is eclipsed by the light of God in Jesus Christ.

Holy Week begins with the muted entrance of a Palestinian Rabbi on the back of a donkey. Holy Week goes on to the darkness of suffering and death. Holy Week concludes with a very grand entrance – the entry of Christ into life and the entry for us all into the light of new hope as death is defeated by the rising of Jesus Christ from the dead.

We have the chance over these next few days to be part of that grand entrance into the life and light of Christ. On Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday evenings at 7.00 p.m. we travel with Christ as a short and meditative Eucharist here in the church. On Thursday the ceremony of Christ washing the feet of his disciples and commemorating the institution of the Eucharist are played out for us here. On Friday we proclaim that Christ has been crucified on a cross for us. We stand with him and enter into his death. On Saturday night and Sunday morning the light and life of Christ are set forth in scripture, in action and in symbol and we have the chance to know that Christ is risen from the dead.

Let us plan to be here and to worship. Let us plan to be here and to journey with Christ into his death and resurrection as we together make our grand entrance into the death and resurrection of Christ our Lord and Saviour.

