

**SERMON FOR PALM SUNDAY – Rev Nathan Thorpe**  
**An Eye for Opportunity**  
**Psalm 118:19-24 & Matthew 21:1-11**

I was going to Westbrook Asda in Warrington on Palm Sunday. The church we were at would meet outside, by the trolley shelter, have a prayer, then press play on a big boombox. It would blare out 'Make may, make way, for the King of Kings' and we'd walk along the parade of shops back to church for our service.

I was incredibly self-conscious of it as a teenager – I can remember wishing none of my friends would be out – I kind of miss it today. All the bustle of a Palm Sunday extravaganza!

But, whatever you are doing this Palm Sunday, I think we've all got an incredible opportunity here.

St John of the Cross wrote 'to come to the knowledge you have not, you must go in the way you have not'<sup>1</sup>. So, in that spirit, let's look at the psalm!

Our reading this morning is from psalm 118.

*Open for me the gates of the righteous; I will enter and give thanks to the Lord.*

*This is the gate of the Lord through which the righteous may enter.*

*I will give you thanks, for you answered me; you have become my salvation.*

The first few verses are ones that emphasise and celebrate self. Now, please don't get me wrong – self-care in a pandemic is a good thing.

But if you took that verse without the second bit, it sounds like something you could put on a motivational tea-towel.

We have, more than ever before in our recent history, a real chance to imagine how it feels not to know the story. We have an opportunity to experience holy week in a way not focussed on the activities within our buildings but spent in the places where we are – because we have no option but to be!

The second part of our reading puts the tea-towel into context – and reminds us that just focussing on what is good to the exclusion of all else does not do us much good at all.

*The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this,  
and it is marvellous in our eyes. The Lord has done it this very day; let us rejoice today  
and be glad.*

Jesus enters Jerusalem in the way that was least expected on the back of a donkey. Yet, even to start with, a carpenter's son was an equally unexpected way to transform a world. Yet the crowd threw their cloaks and palms down for him.

The Christian thinker and activist, Jim Wallis, once wrote 'Hope is believing in spite of the evidence and then watching as the evidence changes'.

Far from being a ridiculous statement, it acknowledges that on some level we all hope for better to come – and we all have an idea, deep within us, of what that looks like – no matter who or where it comes from.

Mark Oakley<sup>2</sup> describes it as: 'We believe in two conversions. God loves us just the way we are but he loves so much he doesn't want us to stay just like that. The first happens when this suddenly makes sense somehow and the second is the rest of our lifetime – trying to slowly adjust to that way of being human that has not yet been tried.'

I wonder, in our search for a holy week, is there something precious, a cloak, or palm, that can be throw down today before Jesus as that will be a cause of joy? Or what about something not precious? A grudge, prejudice, or quarrel?

Notice how the psalmist's language changes when they shift their gaze outwards. 'It is marvellous in *our* eyes' – collectively. Not just our eyes, or their eyes, but all eyes!

Katherine Preston, from the Iona Community, sums up the sentiment of *this* year's Palm Sunday for me, as we *all* walk this Holy Week once again:

'We are in a singular time of change. Old practices, old assumptions, especially about government – are being challenged. We are still trying to figure out what it all means; the path often remains indistinct and frightening at times. But the signposts -surges of hope- are strategically positioned by God to guide us. Watch for them. Listen. This *is* the way!'.<sup>3</sup>

We might even add to ourselves – let us try to walk the walk, so we know a little more of what we're talking about. The questions from our psalm, demonstrated by Jesus' donkey ride into Jerusalem, are:

Where are those who feel rejected? What buildings might be built with those who feel cast aside? How can we spot them to talk of hope as we walk along our own streets?

I will end with a prayer for you from last week's intercessions, that Bishop Paul also included on an update us during the week:

Saviour Christ, in whose way of love lies the secret of all life, and the hope of all people, we pray – for ourselves and those in adversity - for quiet courage to match this hour.

We did not choose to be born or to live in such an age; but let its problems challenge us, its discoveries exhilarate us, its injustices anger us, its possibilities inspire us and its vigour renew us for your kingdom's sake.

Amen

<sup>1</sup> St John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Oakley, Dean of St John's College Cambridge. *By Way of the Heart: Seasons of Faith*.

<sup>3</sup> Katherine Preston, 'Palm Sunday: Surges of Hope'. Neil Paynter (ed.), *The Sun Slowly Rises: Readings, Reflections and Prayers for 3 Holy Week from the Iona Community*.

