

Sermon for Palm Sunday

Text: Mark 11:1-11; Philippians 2:5-11

Jerusalem is built on Mount Zion, opposite the Mount of Olives, with the Valley of Kedron in between. The road to Jerusalem winds around the Mount of Olives, down into the Valley of Kedron, up to the gates of Jerusalem. If you visit, you can still walk a road that follows the same route.

In the Gospel story for Palm Sunday Jesus is about to travel down into the valley, and up into the city.

In a deeper sense, Jesus is about to travel down into bitter conflict with his enemies; down to the final confrontation, arrest, accusations, trial, and condemnation; down to the agony of torture, crucifixion, death and burial. That was the huge valley in front of him, and Jesus was going to walk that journey.

But that was not the end of the journey. There was another path leading upwards. Ahead of Jesus was also his glorious resurrection from the tomb; his reunion with his disciples; and his ascension into heaven.

Palm Sunday is a pause before this final journey. Palm Sunday happens on the Mount of Olives, with Jerusalem in view, but the deep Kedron Valley in between.

We celebrate Palm Sunday as the last Sunday in Lent, after following Christ on his journey towards Jerusalem, with the knowledge that his journey will lead to the Cross. We celebrate Palm Sunday with a pause at the beginning of Holy Week, preparing to watch those great events of Jesus' passion, and then Jesus' resurrection.

As Jesus comes around the Mount of Olives, he receives a royal welcome—a crowd waving branches, making a carpet of cloaks on the road. Jesus is welcomed as a king. Not just a king, but *the* King whom God has promised—the Messiah King.

We hear this in their words: “Hosanna to the Son of David... Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord ... Hosanna in the highest...”.

Did the people understand where the road was leading Jesus? I do not think so. They understood that Jerusalem was the city where it would all happen. But they had no idea what was going to happen.

Jesus knew. He showed that he was a different kind of king. He chose to borrow a donkey and he rode that donkey along this journey. He showed that he was coming in all humility.

That too was a prophecy: "Tell the Daughter of Zion (which means the people of Jerusalem): See your king is coming to you, but he is coming as a gentle king, riding on a donkey".

So the people are right welcoming Jesus as their king and saviour, even though it will soon be revealed that he is a different kind of king and saviour to anything they could imagine.

And we are right to make Palm Sunday into a day of praise, when we praise our king and saviour, even though we sense and know the terrible ordeal that is ahead of Jesus.

We join the crowd on the Mount of Olives, to welcome and praise Jesus. We wait nervously as he sets out on that long, harsh, journey down. But we can see the road up in the distance.

Our reading from Philippians chapter 2 speaks of a similar journey, a road down and road up. But it is a different landscape, and a different time frame. These verses tell of the whole journey of Jesus Christ from eternity to eternity, from heaven down to earth and up to heaven again.

We begin in the eternal glory of God. Christ Jesus, who is God by very nature....Jesus is God by very nature, forever and ever. We say this in the Nicene Creed: God of God, light of light, true God of true God, begotten not made, of one being with the Father.

But Jesus Christ did not consider equality with God as something to be grasped or something to be used for his own advantage. Jesus did not consider his status as God as some prize trophy that he was going to hang onto.

Instead he sets out on this journey downwards. He travels from heaven into this earth. He made himself nothing. He emptied himself. He gave it all up. By taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

His journey begins when he is born into our world. We call this his incarnation. He shares our life with all our human struggles and tragedies.

Even as a person in our world, he lives the most humble of lives. He acts as a servant. He chooses to give of himself for the sake of others, rather gain as much earthly power and wealth and status for himself.

The journey downwards goes even further. And being found in appearance as a human being he humbled himself further by becoming obedient unto death, even death on a cross. As God Jesus was Lord over everything and everyone. Coming into our world in human form, Jesus was totally obedient to God the Father, and made himself obedient to the human needs of us all.

That obedience took him to the depths of the Cross, total sacrifice. He held nothing back for himself, but gave it up for others. That was the spiritual journey of Jesus Christ, from the glory of heaven to the damnation experienced on the Cross.

But the journey does not end there. The journey continues, and the journey rises steeply upwards. Therefore God has raised him up to the highest place. That includes his resurrection from death to life, and his ascension from earth to heaven. And God has given him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow in heaven and on earth and below the earth. Once again Jesus Christ will receive the glory and praise of the whole creation. And every tongue will acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Yes, at the end of the journey every one will know and confess Jesus Christ is Lord, with the power and glory and authority of God, and Jesus Christ will share in the glory of God himself.

So the journey of Jesus Christ is a journey down, and a journey up. We sometimes call the journey down the humiliation of Christ, or his humbling, which he chose for himself. And the journey up is his exaltation, his being lifted up to glory in the power of God.

The gift of our salvation comes in both the humiliation and the exaltation of Christ, in his total giving himself, and in his great victory over sin and death, in the cross and in the resurrection. We see the same pattern in the Apostles Creed, second article:

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord...

There is Jesus Christ as true God.

Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary.

There is his step down into our world, his incarnation into our human world.

He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried. It sounds like stepping down, one step after the next, down into the terrible suffering of the Cross where he submitted to human power, suffered human suffering, with total obedience to God's plan of salvation.

Then he descended into hell. This refers to the fact that Jesus suffered the punishment of hell for the sake of his people. But Jesus could also confront Satan and every evil force to show how his self-sacrifice was also the victory over hell and victory over death and victory over sin and evil.

From there the path rises. On the third day he rose again from the dead. He rises from death to life. He ascended into heaven. He rises from earth to heaven. He sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty. All power and authority and glory of God is restored to him. From thence he will come to judge the living and the dead.

The one who was once judged by sinful humans is now Lord and Judge over all people, and over all of life.

At the beginning of this passage, our journey is connected to the journey of Christ. *Have the same mind, the same attitude, that Jesus Christ had.* It is a call to us to learn from Jesus Christ, to learn to be totally humble. Before God we need to let go of everything, all our pride, all our ambitions for ourselves, and repent. Repent of our sins, and trust our Saviour. And then our God will lift us up and lead us forward in his power, and the power of his forgiveness.

It is a call to show that attitude of humility and service in the way we treat others and the way we think of others. Jesus was always concerned for what others needed from him, not what he wanted from others, and his whole life was a life of self sacrifice.

We are called as God's people. That is a great honour and glory. But it does not mean that we therefore demand honour and glory and privilege for ourselves.

The more we have received, the more we can give of ourselves. Christian life, like the life of Christ, is giving, giving of ourselves.

We do so in the faith and trust that our God lifts us up. Our God gives us even greater honour and privilege than anything we could claim for ourselves. Our God gives us the honour in sharing in the life and salvation of our Saviour.

If we go once more to the Mount of Olives, we join in the praise of the crowd. They were right to praise Jesus Christ as the Saviour and their King, even though they did not know what that would involve or where it was leading Christ.

But their words and their cheering anticipates the whole journey of Jesus Christ, down the mountain and up the other side, from heaven to earth, and to heaven once again. We ask Christ to lead us as we follow in that journey for he has already undertaken that journey for us. Amen.