

## The Messiah and me - Julia Denny-Dimitriou

<b>Palm Sunday</b>	Isaiah 50 4-9a Phil 2 5-11	Psalm 31 9-16/ 118 1-2, 19-29 Matt 21 1-11
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**Prayer** - On this day when we prepare for the holiest of weeks, we say with Samuel, 'speak Lord for your servant is listening'. Amen

Today on this Palm Sunday (PS) we stand with Jesus at the start of a week that changed the course of Israel's history. It was a week that marked a watershed in all human history. If we believe events recorded in Matthew ch 26, it was a week that shook the earth.

What is called 'The triumphal entry into Jerusalem' and is recorded in all 4 gospels, marks new phase, last phase of Christ's ministry which all takes place in Jerusalem from now on. One of the distinctive characteristics of this event is joy. What one commentator described as "a singular, remarkable, and exquisite joy that is at the very heart of the Judeo-Christian story and at the centre of the life of faith." At times this joy simply cannot be contained; it must break out as it does among the crowds greeting Jesus:

"Hosanna to the Son of David!  
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!  
Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

Joy is often a strange blend of satisfaction or fulfillment and anticipation at the same time. The story of Palm Sunday is a witness to this particular quality of joy. It is the story of Israel's joy at seeing God breaking into the world, into people's daily lives and doing a new thing.

This is one of events in life of Christ, one of passages of scripture that many of us know so well that we may be in danger of becoming blasé about it, perhaps unmoved by it. I want to make two points about the Matt 21 Gospel reading before moving on to invite you to interact with it in a slightly different way, given this context of isolation. =====

### **A deliberate act**

There were many times in Jesus' ministry when he tried not to draw authorities' attention to himself, tried to avoid confrontation to be able to continue his preaching, healing, teaching ministry. For example, he told people he healed like the deaf mute in Mark 7 and the blind man in Bethsaida in Mark 8 not to tell anyone what he had done.

That is not the case here. The triumphal entry into Jerusalem is a deliberate and purposeful act of provocation. Jesus does what he does the way he does it deliberately and purposefully. He knows it will provoke the Jewish leaders to act against him.

He knows the time is right for his ministry to start to move towards its climax.  
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He deliberately uses actions and symbols associated with royalty, with the line of King David and with the Messiah. He offers himself as Messiah and inaugurates the events of Passion Week. For example, David and Solomon rode on a colt so Jesus' actions echo the words of the prophet Zech (9:9) which John records (21: 5):

'Tell the daughter of Zion,  
Look your king is coming to you, humble,  
and mounted on a colt, the foal of donkey.'

The Mount of Olives was traditionally associated with the coming of God. Therefore - you may remember - a group of millennialists camped out there at New Year 1999, expecting the Second Coming to happen at the stroke of the new millennium.

Many people in the crowd witnessing Jesus' entry into Jerusalem pick up the associations with royalty and respond in kind, with great joy, shouting traditional praises like those of Psalm 118. They lay down their cloaks and branches cut from trees including palms. Palm branches were also used at the Feast of the Tabernacles, so there is historical precedent for this way of expressing praise and joy. One source suggests that the use of palms to commemorate Christ's entry into Jerusalem on this day was established in Jerusalem in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century when Cyril was Bishop.

### **What kind of Messiah?**

Although Jesus clearly offers himself as the Messiah, the style of Saviour he presents is- as you all well know - different from the expectations current at the time. This is the second point I want to make. The Jews were waiting for a Messiah to deliver them from their Roman rulers. They expected a political, or nationalist leader, perhaps a violent social reformer to restore Israel to its former glory. This perhaps accounts for some of the people's joy in greeting Jesus; and also, why he had been careful all through his ministry not to allow himself to be forced into a mould. He had feared that people would misunderstand him if he claimed to be the Messiah, God's anointed one. He consistently countered people's expectation with the Gospel, with kingdom values, kingdom ways of being and doing. He presented a picture of the peaceful king described in Zech 9:9. =====

There are probably 4 major groups of people involved in this event as in most of the events in Christ's ministry. In addition to Jesus there are:

### **Disciples**

These were Christ's faithful followers, who had been with him, lived with him, learned from him and exercised ministry under his supervision. They, of all the people who witnessed Jesus' entry into Jerusalem probably grasped its significance and understood the divine authority that Jesus was claiming for himself by it. Theirs was probably the greatest joy and the loudest praise. But, as subsequent events of what we now call Holy Week and Easter demonstrated, they did not grasp the whole truth. Scripture was written with the 20/20 vision of hindsight and it was only after the fact that people understood the full significance of the Jesus story.

### **Lazarus group**

Then there was a group of people I'd like to call the Lazarus group. People who knew about Christ and his ministry. Scripture records that Jesus went through Bethany (Mark 11: 1) and Bethphage (v 1) and it is thought that he may have spent the Sabbath with Lazarus and his family. John's gospel suggests (12: 17) that in the crowd following Jesus there were people who had been present when Christ raised Lazarus from the dead. People who knew about Jesus, what he had done and perhaps believed in him but were not as close as disciples. People whose joy was, however, real.

### **Bystanders**

As with most events recorded in the gospels there would also have been bystanders, onlookers or observers like the people who ask the disciples what they are doing with the colt. People who were perhaps neutral towards Jesus, watching, listening, interested but not involved.

### **Pharisees**

Then, John's gospel records, there were the Pharisees (12: 19). Men who were definitely not positively disposed to Christ nor joyous at his coming. To them he was an upstart, illegitimate carpenter from Bethlehem who was upsetting the *status quo*, challenging their teaching, stirring up the people and turning Judaism on its head. These men were certainly not among the joyful crowds waving branches and crying "Hosanna to the king of David". They were more likely to be skulking in the shadows muttering among themselves and plotting to get rid of Jesus. =====

Because many of us are so familiar with this passage I want to suggest a different approach and use a strategy employed in interactive Bible Study, since you will be reading this alone, or perhaps with one or two others.

I want to ask the question "How does this Jesus and his story intersect with my story and how do I respond to him?"

To do this, let's think about the four groups of people identified and how they relate to Jesus.

Towards which group do you feel most sympathetic?

With which group do you most closely identify?

At different times and under different circumstances we probably all identify with every group, perhaps with more than one at the same time! But today, here and now on Palm Sunday with which group do you stand and why?

As we move into Holy Week with its momentous events leading to Good Friday and Easter, let us spend a few minutes reflecting on where we stand in relation to this Messiah, where and how he may be calling us.

Since we cannot gather to worship in the traditional services of the Week, perhaps this could be a source of reflection throughout the week.

Here are some questions that may be helpful; or the Holy Spirit may have other questions for you.

## **Palm Sunday: The Messiah and me**

### **Disciples**

In what ways is your joy in the Lord a mixture of fulfilment and anticipation?  
What new thing does God want to do in your life?

### **Lazarus Group**

Why are you following Jesus and what do you want from him?  
What are some of the things that prevent you from sharing wholeheartedly in the disciples' joy?

### **Bystanders**

How do you feel towards Jesus?  
What are you going to do about him?  
What are some of the things that prevent you from sharing in the joy of this day?

### **Pharisees**

Why are you angry with Jesus?  
What are you going to do about him?  
What are some of the things that prevent you from sharing in the joy of this day?

**Conclusion**

In the events that we will commemorate this week starting with Palm Sunday, God demonstrated the eternal dimensions of divine love. The hour of decision has come for Israel. Israel's hour of decision about God and how it receives its promised Messiah who comes riding on a colt hailed with shouts of praise.

The hour of decision also comes for us when we too encounter Jesus the Messiah.

So as we ponder the events of what we know as Palm Sunday, Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, we stand among the disciples, with the Lazarus group, perhaps with the bystanders or the Pharisees, and the same question that Jesus posed in himself and his ministry for them, faces us too.

"How do we respond to the promised Messiah?" Do we accept and believe; prefer not to commit and remain neutral; or perhaps reject him?

Will we share in the joy of fulfilment and anticipation?

"Hosanna to the Son of David!  
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!  
Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

May we be able to share in those praises.

**AMEN**

**References**

Sermonwriter.com; laughingbird.net; holytextures.com; David Guzik: blueletterbible.org