

## Palm Sunday – 2 April 2023

### Philippians 2:5-11

5 The attitude you should have is the one that Christ Jesus had: 6 He always had the nature of God, but he did not think that by force he should try to remain equal with God. 7 Instead of this, of his own free will he gave up all he had, and took the nature of a servant. He became like a human being and appeared in human likeness. 8 He was humble and walked the path of obedience all the way to death — his death on the cross. 9 For this reason God raised him to the highest place above and gave him the name that is greater than any other name. 10 And so, in honour of the name of Jesus all beings in heaven, on earth, and in the world below will fall on their knees, 11 and all will openly proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

### Matthew 21:1-11

1 As Jesus and his disciples approached Jerusalem, they came to Bethphage at the Mount of Olives. There Jesus sent two of the disciples on ahead 2 with these instructions: "Go to the village there ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied up with her colt beside her. Untie them and bring them to me. 3 And if anyone says anything, tell him, "The Master needs them"; and then he will let them go at once." 4 This happened in order to make come true what the prophet had said: 5 "Tell the city of Zion, Look, your king is coming to you! He is humble and rides on a donkey and on a colt, the foal of a donkey." 6 So the disciples went and did what Jesus had told them to do: 7 they brought the donkey and the colt, threw their cloaks over them, and Jesus got on. 8 A large crowd of people spread their cloaks on the road while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 9 The crowds walking in front of Jesus and those walking behind began to shout, "Praise to David's Son! God bless him who comes in the name of the Lord! Praise be to God!" 10 When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was thrown into an uproar. "Who is he?" the people asked. 11 "This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth in Galilee," the crowds answered.



Focus: **Determined to do God's will**

Function: To encourage people to be Christ-like, to be focused on & determined to do God's will.

Today on Palm Sunday, we join Jesus in his entry into Jerusalem with triumphal fanfare; a large crowd welcomed him as the king after David. As I read through this passage, again and again, I wondered why Jesus had chosen to ride into Jerusalem this time while he had been on foot all other times. I wonder why he had chosen a donkey and a colt among all animals and how that was arranged. I wonder what was going through the disciples' minds when they followed Jesus's instruction to fetch the donkey and the colt from a nearby village and when they watched the people welcoming Jesus as they entered Jerusalem. I wonder why the people had received Jesus like a king, shouting, "Praise to David's Son! God bless him who comes in the name of the Lord! Praise be to God!" But the fanfare ended as quickly as it had started when Jesus reached the Temple. I wonder why there was no more "red-carpet" welcome when Jesus returned to Jerusalem the following day. And I wonder how many of these people who shouted "Praise to David's Son!" soon joined the others a few days later, shouting, "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

You may have more questions than I do. But such questions keep us engaged with the text, with the story of Jesus, and at least, I hope, let our celebration of this Palm Sunday be more insightful than merely remembering Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem and would prepare us spiritually for Good Friday.

The Gospel reading begins with Jesus instructing two of his disciples to fetch a donkey and a colt in a village ahead, somewhere near Bethphage and Bethany, not far from Jerusalem. "Go to the village there ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied up with her colt beside her. Untie them and bring them to me. And if anyone says anything, tell him, 'The Master needs them'; and then he will let them go at once."

This seems to be a comprehensive instruction, even with what to say when someone questions them. Moreover, the emphasis on "at once" in finding and releasing the animals seems to make the process straightforward & easy. We may wonder if Jesus was exercising his supernatural knowledge of the sequence of events, OR he had pre-arranged all these with the secret collection code of "The Master needs them." Whichever it is, one thing is obvious. Throughout his public ministry, Jesus travelled on foot all the time except by boat when he crossed the Sea of Galilee, but not this time. Therefore, he had deliberately ridden into Jerusalem on a donkey and a colt on this day. Why?

Indeed, the author of Matthew's Gospel explains that "This happened to make come true what the prophet had said." Five centuries before Jesus, Zechariah prophesied, saying, "Rejoice, rejoice, people of Zion! Shout for joy, you people of Jerusalem! Look, your king is coming to you! He comes triumphant and

victorious, but humble and riding on a donkey — on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” (Zechariah 9:9) Understandably, as depicted in 1 Kings 1:33, it was during times of peace that a king would use a donkey as the mode of transportation instead of a horse, denoting the Messiah as peaceable and humble.

In other words, this king, who comes triumphantly, is not at the head of an army but comes in peace, not to plunder the people but to restore them. And on that note, as stated in a similar account in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus promised to return the donkey immediately after use.

Consequently, as Jesus came into Jerusalem riding on a donkey and a colt, the crowd recognised that, and they welcomed their king (their Messiah) by laying their cloaks and leafy branches on the road (ref. 2 Kings 9:13), paying homage and praising God for this king by shouting, "Praise to David's Son! God bless him who comes in the name of the Lord! Praise be to God!" Or in the traditional translation, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

If we close our eyes and picture Jesus riding on a donkey and a colt, entering the city with his entourage consisting of fishermen, tax collectors, commoners, perhaps widows, and two blind beggars who had just regained their sights, how does this impress you in any sense of royalty or kingship? Not at all, isn't it?

But not long ago, in Matthew 16, when Simon Peter confessed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the living God, Jesus ordered them not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. Yet, on this day, Jesus made this public declaration by parading into Jerusalem.

What has led him to do this? Why?

So far, on three occasions, Jesus had warned his disciples that he would be handed over to the Jewish authorities; he would suffer, die, and rise to life again three days later. None of the disciples was ready for this at all, and they didn't know how to respond positively to Jesus. Matthew 16 also recorded Simon Peter's objection, "God forbid it, Lord!" he said. "That must never happen to you!" And for that, Jesus reprimanded him, "Get away from me, Satan! You are an obstacle in my way, because these thoughts of yours don't come from God, but from human nature."

Through these, we get a glimpse of Jesus being fully aware of the consequences as he pressed on with his ministry & mission. He was aware that his open criticisms of the Jewish authorities for manipulating God's Law to suit their purposes and imposing their traditions on the commoners as the Law would threaten their religious system and way of life. He knew that when he healed people on the Sabbath on numerous occasions, the Jewish authorities would be

upset. Moreover, the Jewish authorities were infuriated as they couldn't accept the idea that Jesus possessed the authority on earth to forgive sins (9:6), and that he was the only person (and those to whom he chose to reveal) who would know the Father as the Father had given him all things (11:27). Such claims were deemed blasphemous.

Despite knowing the fierce objections and hatred of the Jewish authorities against him in his ministry, Jesus obediently carried out his mission of doing the Father's will even if his life was at risk. He focused on bringing God nearer to the people, drawing them closer to God to experience God's bountiful grace and love. And he accomplished his mission by freeing people from the bondage of spiritual poverty or deadness, and possessing the life-giving Spirit of God to have and enjoy the new life in the kingdom of God through faith in him.

As Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey and a colt, he was fully aware that his hour to face the trials of his life had drawn near. Eventually, he asked his disciples to set up the upper room for his last supper where he gave them the last round of teaching and instructions before he was betrayed. However, the reality of death is crippling and difficult to confront for anyone, even for Jesus. On the night that he was betrayed, at the Garden of Gethsemane, the anguish of his impending suffering and death was so intense that he prayed to God, saying, "My Father, if it is possible, take this cup of suffering from me!" It is simply human to hope so! However, Jesus continued praying, "Yet not what I want, but what you want" (26:39). Indeed, Jesus had set his mind on fulfilling God's will and he lived his life doing so.

Today's first reading from Philippians 2 talks about Jesus, though having the nature of God, took on the nature of a servant to accomplish the will of God for all humanity's sake. He was humble and walked the path of obedience all the way to his death on the cross. And we are reminded to have the same attitude (or mindset) as one that Jesus had.

Indeed, like Jesus's prayer, "not what I want, but what you want," how often have we said that to God?

What does it really mean to you (to us) to follow Jesus?

Besides having faith in Jesus, doing the will of God is essentially crucial. In Matthew 7:21, Jesus assures us, saying, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." And in 12:50, "Whoever does what my Father in heaven wants is my brother, my sister, and my mother."

So our new life in Jesus is not about personal salvation but a life like Jesus's, determined to do God's will. And this is succinctly summarised in a parable in

Matthew 25, and that is, to feed the hungry, quench the thirsty, extend hospitality to the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit the imprisoned. And such acts or services are to be done to the least (or most vulnerable) of all; in other words, done with no expectations of repayment.

Besides the specific desires that God calls each of us, God's general desire for us to care for the people in our community and beyond is loud and clear. How have we been responding to God's call in doing God's will?

As we begin the Holy Week and prepare spiritually for Good Friday and then Easter, may we focus on Jesus, and reflect deeply upon his life and work. Jesus was determined to do God's will, may we be of the same mind as Jesus and have the faith to do the same. Amen.