

Haverhill Methodist Church – Worship at Home
Palm Sunday 28th March 2021

Welcome Message – Revd. Peter Goodhall

The gates of Holy Week are open and on this Palm Sunday we celebrate our King who rides a donkey. We bring to Jesus the best of what we are, laying down our lives in service, as he laid down his life for us. We welcome our preacher today, David Frost.

Opening Prayer

Blessed is the king who comes in the name of Lord!
Lord Jesus Christ, on Palm Sunday you entered the rebellious city where you were to die. Enter into our hearts and subdue them wholly to yourself. And, as your faithful disciples blessed your coming and spread their garments in the way, covering it with palm branches, make us ready to lay at your feet all that we have and are, and to bless you, the One who comes in the name of the Lord.
Amen.

Hymn/Song

Prayer of Praise

Loving God our Father, you are the rock and foundation on which our lives are built. You have made us and called us your children. You love us. We praise and adore you.
Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, blessing and honour belong to you. You share in our joys and our sadness. You share in our suffering and pain. You walked the lonely road to the cross and there you died for us that we might be forgiven and be God's friends. You are alive and present with us now. We praise and adore you.
Holy Spirit, you are the giver of light and life. You make us strong when we feel weak and you help us in our need.
We praise and adore you. **Amen.**

Bible Readings

Mark chapter 11 verses 1-11

Hebrews chapter 12 verses 1-3

Prayer of Confession

Gracious God, we confess we are sometimes swayed by the crowd's approval.

We confess we are sometimes loyal and sometimes disloyal.

We confess we are sometimes fearful of standing up for what is just and right.

So we lay down our defences and our disguises at the feet of the One who sees us we really are.

Open our eyes to see Jesus and to be seen by him.

We are sorry for our sins. Enter our world today.

Help us to welcome Jesus as Messiah, Saviour and King.

Forgive us, restore us, and renew us for the journey of faith.

Set us free for worship and service. We shall be your witnesses.

For we ask it in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Hymn/Song

Sermon by David Frost

Palm Sunday could be described as perhaps a slightly under-emphasised and under-celebrated day in the Christian calendar. However, it is a very important day as it marks the start of Holy Week when Jesus entered Jerusalem in a very humble way, riding a donkey. The week proceeded with miracles, healings, celebrating the Passover with his disciples, betrayal to the Jewish authorities, imprisonment, trial by the Jewish leaders and trial before Pontius Pilate the Roman governor of the area. Despite Pilate believing he was not guilty, he condemned him to death and on Good Friday Jesus was crucified. With the dawning of Easter Sunday he was raised to life again. It is easy to see why Palm Sunday, when compared with the other more striking events is somewhat overwhelmed. However, it is the day on which Jesus irrevocably set his face towards his fate.

Riding into Jerusalem on a donkey seems innocuous enough but that act indicated to the Jewish leaders, who largely opposed him, that he was now publicly signalling that he was the promised Messiah. The Messiah had been foretold by many Jewish prophets over the centuries and it was known that the Messiah would announce his presence by riding into the city on a donkey. It is quite conceivable that the Jewish leaders, scribes and Pharisees and lawyers finally decided at that point that it really was time to have Jesus executed. Palm Sunday is therefore a very significant day. The crowd lining the dusty road into Jerusalem unknowingly played a large part in the Jewish leaders' decision. The crowd knew from scriptures that they would have heard in the synagogue many times, that the Messiah would be recognisable in that way. So, when they saw that, they became very excited. They tore branches from the palm trees and laid them in the road. They also waved them in the air, shouted and cheered, and probably threw handfuls of dust in the air (after all confetti had not then been invented!) They would have made a tremendous noise and I am sure the Jewish leaders would have heard it and come running. These scribes and Pharisees would have had, I think, two main fears at that point. Firstly, that the Roman military would hear the kerfuffle and thinking a riot was in progress, would turn out in force. The scribes and Pharisees would have been more concerned for their own loss of authority than for the damage to the people, I suspect. The second fear would be that the crowd might decide to march alongside Jesus with an unstoppable demand for the scribes and Pharisee to accept that he was the Messiah. Either way I think that the Jewish leaders would have gone to bed that day very unsettled.

I would like to talk about witnesses. We are surrounded by them. They come in all shapes and sizes and give us advice and guidance on all sorts of subjects. If you think about it, you can see that we rely on witnesses to a very large extent. They speak from their own experiences, what they have seen and what they have learned. It is down to us to believe them or not. Some will be good witnesses. They will tell the truth and speak from an unbiased view point. Some witnesses are not reliable. They might be motivated by greed or deceit. Hopefully most are motivated by truth by genuine love and concern for others. We need to choose who we will believe and here we have the blessing of being led by the Holy Spirit which will "lead us into all righteousness".

We too are witnesses to others. We have similar choices.

For instance, we have to decide whether our religious experiences and testimony will be shared with others or will we be too self-conscious to do that.

Consider that crowd of people lining that dusty road into Jerusalem. They were witnesses to an amazing point in history. Jesus, God's son, was starting the week which culminated in his crucifixion and resurrection. Those people were witnessing the start and continued to witness the events of the rest of the week right through to Easter Sunday. Imagine what they would say to their friends, family, children and grandchildren. To their contacts, to each other.

Would they be truthful and accurate witnesses to other people?

Would they decide to keep quiet? During that week all sorts of emotions and feelings would come to the surface. Many people in that crowd, having cheered and supported Jesus on Palm Sunday, would later be in the crowd witnessing his trial before Pilate and some of them would have been persuaded (or perhaps even bribed) by the Jewish leaders, to call for Jesus' death. What witness would they give bearing in mind all of that?

Think of the disciples of Jesus. What would their witness be during that week and throughout the future? On Palm Sunday they too may have been anxious for Jesus' safety. They would have been anxious during the rest of the week and the bible tells us that on the day Jesus was taken prisoner by the Jewish authorities they ran away. And Peter, one of the strongest disciples, actually denied him. Betrayed him. Although their fear was turned to joy on Easter Day, they of all people would have felt so wretched. Even though Jesus forgave them, their joy at his resurrection would have been tinged with guilt. What would their witness have been during the rest of their lives? I think they would have been open and honest. I also think their ministry in future years would have been strengthened by their experiences during Holy Week. What they saw during that week and the weeks after Jesus' resurrection would have given power and authority to their future witness to others. Also, we need to consider the scribes and Pharisees and all the other officers with authority. What would they say immediately and to their dying day? There were some of their number who believed in Jesus. They would have accepted him as the Messiah but for the fact that if they had openly admitted this they would have been expelled from the club.

However, scriptures tell us that one of them, a man named Nicodemus, came to Jesus by night seeking the truth. He too was frightened to be openly seen with Jesus. What would his witness have been in years to come? One would like to think that the truth would impel him to be truthful himself. We know he partly defended Jesus from the Jewish leaders' accusations, so perhaps he would be a good witness in future.

Consider Pilate. He would have had spies everywhere trying to gauge the mood and tendencies of the people he governed. Out of character, later in the week as a hard-bitten ruthless foreigner he clearly saw the innocence of Jesus to the accusations of the Jewish leaders. He would have seen the hatred of the Jewish leaders and noticed the way the common people changed their attitude. His wife had nightmares about Jesus and begged Pilate to have nothing to do with condemning Jesus. He even washed his hands in public signifying his own innocence in this matter. I wonder what his future witness would have been concerning that week.

These people all witnessed these events. They were part of them. It would be so interesting to know how they would witness to others in later years.

Many years later the Apostle Paul wrote to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem and reminded them of the many people in Jewish history who had shown great faith in God, often in extreme circumstances. He too referred to those men and women as witnesses. Witnesses to what faith in God can achieve. He reminded them that these witnesses "subdued kingdoms, created righteousness, stopped the mouths of lions, escaped the sword and were even unharmed in fire". They were valiant for truth and righteousness. Paul used them as examples when he told those Christians "seeing we are surrounded by such a cloud of witnesses let us ignore the weight of our problems and our sins which so easily drag us down and let us run patiently the race that we are in, looking to Jesus for our support". What wonderfully effective advice. It is still so relevant to our day.

The witnesses in Palm Sunday and the whole of Holy Week, the witness of Christians down the ages and Christians today, are clearly telling us God loves us and will go to any length to support us. His promises can be trusted.

Let me add my own personal witness.

I grew up in a wonderful Christian church community.

I too was surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, men and women and young people who loved me, supported me and taught me so many things. Most of them were poor but were rich in spirit. They made me what I am. I don't have time to explain what they did for me but perhaps I will on another occasion.

Palm Sunday reminds us that it really does matter what kind of witnesses we are and that our witness as to the power of God in our lives can be an enormous blessing to others.

And finally, a challenging question for me and all of us. If we were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict us? Let's make sure our lives make the verdict clear.

God bless you all.

Hymn/Song

Prayers of Intercession

Let us pray.

We praise and thank you God for signs of spring; for daffodils and blossom, and all the green shoots of growth.

We pray for the Church.

We pray for new growth and new life.

We pray for Christians who feel isolated; who long to gather with others; who cannot access online worship.

We pray for our Sunday Club children and our young families.

We pray for the Easter witness of your church across the world.

Let many hear the good news of Jesus and welcome him.

As Jesus wept over Jerusalem, we pray for the Holy Land and the Middle East. May peace and goodwill drive away hate and fear around the world. May it begin with us.

We praise and thank you for the progress that has been made in the Covid vaccination programme. We pray for those in our health services who have been put under additional pressure as a result of the pandemic; for those preparing for a third wave; and those working in care homes.

We pray for those who suffer ill health.

We pray for those who are troubled.

We pray for those who are sad or grieving.

We pray for our own needs.

Come, Lord Jesus, save and help us.

Bring your healing, your peace and your comfort we pray.

We praise and thank you for the message of hope, encouragement and new life that Jesus brings.

Bring us all through to that day when we shall sing your praise in heaven. Here on earth, help us to be your faithful witnesses.

We ask these prayers in the name of Jesus Christ our Saviour and our King. **Amen.**

Unite your prayers with the whole church as you pray
The Lord's Prayer. 'Our Father...'

Hymn/Song

Palm Cross Prayer

God our Saviour, whose Son entered Jerusalem as Messiah to suffer and die: may these palm crosses be for us a sign of his victory; may we who carry them ever hail him as king and follow him in the way that leads to eternal life.

With all the faithful, may we enter the New Jerusalem in triumph; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

The Blessing

We offer our lives and our gifts to the Lord.

Jesus, bringer of peace, revealer of glory, lead us into this Holy Week. May we remember your story, renew our commitment, witness to your love and follow your way.

As we bless you, you bless us. **Amen.**

Coffee Time Conversation

- Whose Christian witness has inspired you in your life?
- Ask God to show you how you can be His witness today.
- How will you mark and observe this coming Holy Week?

Suggested Hymns and Songs

More Traditional Music:

All glory, laud, and honour
Ride on, ride on in majesty
My song is love unknown

More Contemporary Music:

Praise is rising
Make way, make way for Christ the King in splendour arrives
Blessed be the name of the Lord

Keep social distancing.
Keep safe.
Keep communicating.
God bless you and keep you until we meet again.
My prayers are with you.

With love,

Peter