

Into Jerusalem

This Sunday, observed in some churches as Palm Sunday and others as Passion Sunday, sets the stage of contrast that is Holy Week: jubilant crowds hail Jesus as God's chosen one; angry crowds call for Jesus' execution. The texts address the complexity of discipleship, yet assure that those who serve God and neighbour remain in the embrace of God's unfailing presence.

Focus Scripture: Mark 14:1—15:47

This Sunday, the readings invite reflection of the complex array of events and emotions that mark our observance of Holy Week.

Churches who enter Holy Week through the Liturgy of the Palms will encounter Jesus' jubilant entry into Jerusalem through the gospel reading, **Mark 11:1–11** or **John 12:12–26**. Both Mark and John report that the crowds are shouting hosannas – blessing the one who comes in God's name, the "King of Israel." They cheer Jesus as the one to usher in the coming glorious realm of their ancestor David. The special honours given along the way (palms, use of coats, and messianic greetings) are indications that they regard Jesus as royalty.

However, the manner of Jesus' arrival probably does not meet the people's expectations of what the longed-for saviour, or messiah, would be. Jesus enters on a colt, rather than on a horse as a military leader would ride. In doing so, Jesus teaches again about the Messiah who prepares the world for the peace-filled reign of God with an attitude of humility.

The acclamation "blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD!" comes from Psalm 118:26. **Psalm 118:1–2, 19–29** is the psalm appointed for the Liturgy of the Palms. Psalm 118 is also part of the Jewish liturgy for the Passover.

Churches who enter Holy Week through the Liturgy of the Passion will encounter people, some of them very close to Jesus, who fail to understand Jesus' identity as God's Messiah. Consider the behaviour of the group of disciples called The Twelve. They fail to understand the meaning of the anointing of Jesus. They fail to understand the meaning of Jesus' words at the Passover meal. They fail to stay awake with Jesus to pray in Gethsemane.

One disciple betrays Jesus. They desert Jesus at the time of trial.

"Truly this man was God's Son!" (Mark 15:39). When we reach this verse in the focus passage, it's like the sun breaking through dense clouds. At the close of the description of Jesus' suffering and death, a Roman centurion clearly proclaims Jesus' identity. Women disciples, who have been steadfast followers, also seem to understand. They do not flee; rather they stay at the cross. When Jesus' body is laid in the tomb, women are still there.

We began the Season of Lent with the psalmist, singing of God's steadfast love. Here, at the close of the season, the gospel of Mark presents another sign of God's steadfast love. The centurion's revelation of God's love made flesh in Jesus shines in the story of Jesus' passion – Jesus' time of suffering and death.

In **Isaiah 50:4–9a**, the servant faces persecution, but remains confident that God will deliver. Central to the second part of the book of Isaiah is this figure of the servant who suffers, called by God to be a prophet.

A cry for God's mercy is heard in **Psalm 31:9–16**, the words of someone in despair. The psalmist is confident that God is gracious and will act with steadfast love.

A glimpse into the way that early Christian communities interpreted Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is recorded in **Philippians 2:5–11**. This hymn to Christ is perhaps the most ancient hymn or liturgy recorded in the New Testament.

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Whether we enter Holy Week with the Liturgy of the Palms or the Liturgy of the Passion, we are invited to explore the meaning of Jesus' suffering and death in the six days ahead. Why are these stories of Holy Week important to Christians today?

April 5, 2009

Focus Scripture
Mark 14:1—15:47

Additional Scriptures

Isaiah 50:4–9a

Psalm 31:9–16

Philippians 2:5–11

Liturgy of the Palms:

Mark 11:1–11

or John 12:12–26

Psalm 118:1–2, 19–29

Holy God, we rejoice in this day you have given us. Be gracious in our times of questioning, and make us bold followers of Jesus the Christ. Amen.

If you have Internet access, visit www.spiritseasons.com to access Spirit Sightings for connections between current events and the focus passage.

