

## INTRODUCTION

When we think of Palm Sunday Mass, two things come quickly to mind: the palms we pick up on the way in and the long Gospel reading of the Passion proclaimed by the priest and two lectors (after all, the day is properly referred to as Palm Sunday of the Lord's Passion).

It is in the entrance into Jerusalem, five days before the Crucifixion, from which we hear about palms, and from whence the name "Palm" Sunday is derived, on which I will be focusing in this paper.

Through homilies old and new, books on the life of Christ, commentaries, and concluding with my own insights and reflections, I will go into some detail regarding the relatively short passages, found in all four gospels, each with its own variations, describing Jesus' entry into the City of Peace (ironically, "which, down through the ages, has known violence, war, and deportation"<sup>1</sup>).

Something I often encourage folks to do, whether engaging in formal Bible study or in just reading Scripture, is to pay attention to details, especially in those books that hold the highest place for Christians: the Gospels. We will learn that what seem to be insignificant details have a depth of meaning we would not have imagined. Each Gospel means to tell Jesus' story, focusing on His ministry, but none are very long. The authors (the evangelists and the Holy Spirit) were not inclined to waste words. So, my hope is that you will come away from this paper never looking at Palm Sunday quite the same way again.

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<sup>1</sup> John Paul II (13 April 2003), *Palm Sunday Homily*, no. 2. Retrieved from [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/2003/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_hom\\_20030413\\_palm-sunday.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/2003/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_20030413_palm-sunday.html)

## HISTORY

Before we get into scripture, a brief note about the history of Palm Sunday. We know that it was celebrated as early as the fourth century in Jerusalem and in the following century in the West. Over time, variations in ceremony appeared in different regions until Pope Saint Pius V issued the Roman Missal in 1570 to standardize practice. Even since then, though, certain revisions and simplifications have been formally introduced while not altering major themes.

“Palms,” due to regional variations, may be anything from olive branches, to willows, to yews, to spruce and box, to actual fronds from palm trees. Customarily, the blessed “palms” are kept throughout the home, or maybe even in the car and office, until the following Palm Sunday. Some parishes will collect old palms to burn to be used for ashes on Ash Wednesday.

During the opening Procession of Palms, immediately after the blessing of the palms, “[o]ne of the gospel accounts of Christ’s triumphant entry into Jerusalem is then read” based on a three-year cycle: Matthew, then Mark (with the option of using John), then Luke. Then, the celebrant says to the faithful, uniting us with the crowds of that first Palm Sunday:

*Let us go forth in peace,  
Praising Jesus our Messiah,  
as did the crowds who  
welcomed him to Jerusalem.*

Then the procession begins. Psalms declaring Christ’s kingship, like Psalm 24 or Psalm 47 are sung. Also sung is the ninth-century hymn [\*Gloria laus\*](#) (which begins *All glory, laud and honor to thee Redeemer, King!*)

Finally, the reading of the Passion narrative on this day goes back to at least Pope Saint Leo the Great in the early fifth century. The reading (actually, singing) of the Passion story by *three* different cantors goes back to at least the year 1600. Since Pope Blessed Paul VI's *Roman Missal* of 1970, the readings are on a three-year cycle, with Matthew, then Mark, then Luke proclaimed (John's version is read on Good Friday each year).

I am indebted to James Monti's book, *The Week of Salvation*, for this brief background.<sup>2</sup> I encourage you to get it yourself to read in-depth the development of each day of Holy Week from Palm Sunday through Easter Sunday.

## SCRIPTURE

### Introduction

Now let us move on to what Scripture has to say about Christ's entry into Jerusalem for His final Passover. As we study these passages, we will not only be discussing the literal meaning of the text, but also, with the help of great figures in our Church's history, the following senses as well: anagogical (that is, events' eternal significance), allegorical (meaning, events' significance in Christ), and moral (that which leads us to act justly). I refer you to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [nos. 115-119](#) for more about the senses of Scripture.

Without further ado, let us jump into this ambitious task, joining Jesus on this final journey which He had been anticipating for a long time.

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<sup>2</sup> James Monti, *The Week of Salvation: History and Traditions of Holy Week* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1993), 17-70.

[Matthew 21:1-11](#)

The village of Bethphage mentioned has a name which means “house of unripe figs” and prepares the reader for the parable, later in this twenty-first chapter of Matthew, of the fig tree that does not produce fruit (vv. 18-22).<sup>3</sup> No wonder Jesus soon weeps over Jerusalem with a pitiful lament two chapters later (23:37-39). The Mount of Olives, where Bethphage was located, is mentioned “because it was associated with messianic expectations” where “the Lord himself would come there to defend Jerusalem and become king over all the earth (Zech 14:4-9).”<sup>4</sup>

With this episode, we are reminded of Solomon’s coronation as king of Israel, as recounted in 1 Kings. Both are called “Son of David” (see Prov 1:1), one comes in riding a colt, the other a mule (1 Kgs 1:32-40), a great crowd is present for the investiture of a new king (1 Kgs 1:39-40), and Jerusalem is in a great commotion (1 Kgs 1:45).<sup>5</sup>

Mentioned are both a colt and an ass. Matthew is the only evangelist to indicate two animals were brought to Jesus. Ferdinand Prat explains: “The foal was tied near its mother, and the disciples...brought both animals, a natural precaution to make the still untamed foal more docile.”<sup>6</sup> Church Father after Church Father saw deeper meaning in this. St. Jerome, the great biblical scholar and translator of the Bible into Latin, says this: “The ass which was used to the yoke, and subdued, and had born[e] the yoke of the Law, is interpreted to mean the Synagogue

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<sup>3</sup> Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri, *The Gospel of Matthew*. Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 264.

<sup>4</sup> Mitch and Sri, *Matthew*, 264.

<sup>5</sup> Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, *The Gospel of Matthew*. The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2000), 53.

<sup>6</sup> Ferdinand Prat, S.J., *Jesus Christ: His Life, His Teaching, and His Work* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1950), 192. Prat goes on to say that the other evangelists thought this detail too insignificant, but Matthew includes it to verify more literally Zechariah’s prophecy.

[Hilary of Poitiers sees them as the Samaritans instead of the Jews]. The ass's colt, wanton and unbroken, stands for the people of the Gentiles: for Judea in respect to God is the mother of the Gentiles."<sup>7</sup> Origen adds that by sending His "true and genuine" disciples (figuratively Peter and Paul<sup>8</sup>) to fetch them, Christ is freeing both Israel and the Gentiles from the bonds of sin by their teaching.<sup>9</sup> "[I]t is through the Apostles that both we and they have been called to the faith, and through the Apostles that we have been brought to Jesus," says St. John Chrysostom.<sup>10</sup>

Regarding his riding in as opposed to walking in, "Jesus enters the holy city on an ass to signal that he is fulfilling Zech 9:9: "Behold, your king comes to you, meek and riding on an ass."<sup>11</sup> He makes it clear "that he is the messiah Jerusalem has been waiting for!"<sup>12</sup> But a meek one bringing peace (Zech 9:9-10).<sup>13</sup> According to St. Jerome, the cloaks thrown on the animals "can be understood to mean, either the teaching of virtue, or the explanation of the Scriptures, or the variety of the Church's teachings; with which if a soul be not clothed and adorned it cannot merit to have Jesus seated on it."<sup>14</sup> Practically, they served as a saddle to this previously unriden animal.

We also think of Jehu who was greeted as King of Israel with the people laying garments before him (2 Kgs 9:13)<sup>15</sup> thus showing that the people "are symbolically accepting Jesus as their

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<sup>7</sup> M. F. Toal, ed., *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers (vol. 2)* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1958), 163-64.

<sup>8</sup> Toal, *Sermons*, 169.

<sup>9</sup> Toal, *Sermons*, 166, 169.

<sup>10</sup> Toal, *Sermons*, 177.

<sup>11</sup> Mitch and Sri, *Matthew*, 265.

<sup>12</sup> Mitch and Sri, *Matthew*, 265.

<sup>13</sup> Mitch and Sri, *Matthew*, 265.

<sup>14</sup> Toal, *Sermons*, 174.

<sup>15</sup> Hahn and Mitch, *Matthew*, 54.

king.”<sup>16</sup> The *Incomplete Commentary on Matthew*<sup>17</sup> goes further: “The garments are the commands...[t]he leaves...are the appearance of piety. Both the commands of the law and the appearances of the Jewish practice were ordered to be treaded upon by Christ on the road...[--] dated legalism is trampled.”<sup>18</sup> And the cry, “Hosanna!” simply is Hebrew for “Save us!”<sup>19</sup> although it became in time an acclamation “meaning something like “Long live...”<sup>20</sup> “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord’ comes from Psalm 118:26 and is a jubilant and appreciative greeting to someone entrusted with a mission from God.”<sup>21</sup> Jesus comes in God’s name as his faithful representative, who will perfectly accomplish his will.”<sup>22</sup>

All of this tells us that “Jesus is indeed making a royal claim. He wants his path and his action to be understood in terms of Old Testament promises that are fulfilled in his person...His claim is based on obedience to the mission received from his Father.”<sup>23</sup> But, “[i]t was also His desire that the pomp of His entry should be so unassuming as to give no offence to the Roman authorities, and that it would give nothing of a riotous or revolutionary character...a Roman

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<sup>16</sup> George Martin, *Bringing the Gospel of Luke to Life: Insight and Inspiration* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2011), 514.

<sup>17</sup> “An early Christian commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, written sometime in the 5th century,” by an unknown author. Retrieved from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opus\\_Imperfectum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opus_Imperfectum)

<sup>18</sup> Thomas C. Oden, gen. ed., *Matthew 14-28: Ancient Christian Commentary on Sacred Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 126. For a deeper dive into this and other aspects of the entry into Jerusalem in Matthew see Thomas C. Oden and Gerald L. Bray, ser. ed. *Incomplete Commentary on Matthew* (Opus imperfectum), vol. 2: Ancient Christian Texts (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010), 293-99.

<sup>19</sup> Hahn and Mitch, *Matthew*, 54.

<sup>20</sup> *Saint Matthew’s Gospel: The Navarre Bible* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1988), 180.

<sup>21</sup> *Matthew: The Navarre Bible*, 180.

<sup>22</sup> Mary Healy, *The Gospel of Mark*. Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 223.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), *Jesus of Nazareth, Part Two: Holy Week* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2011), 5.

passing by...would have been more likely to smile at what would seem to be a ludicrous procession of masquerade.”<sup>24</sup>

In stark contrast, “instead of rejoicing in the king's arrival (as Zech 9:9 exhorted them to do), the Jerusalem inhabitants question Jesus' worthiness to receive such a royal welcome: ‘Who is this?’ they ask. The crowds (probably consisting of many Galilean Passover pilgrims) emphasize that Jesus is one of their own, not a Judean. He-is Jesus of Nazareth (not Jerusalem), a city in Galilee (not Judea).”<sup>25</sup> Observing were the Pharisees and the Romans. And, of course, citizens of Jerusalem who were “shaken” which, in Greek, “describes the vibration caused by an earthquake”<sup>26</sup> anticipating the actual earthquake Matthew later describes at the moment of Jesus’ death (27:51-52).

With this episode ends the “Messianic secret” of Matthew’s gospel, in which Jesus had consistently warned others not to let it be known of His mission. In a sense this is a second epiphany. As Jesus’ death nears, He wishes to make His identity fully known. And He does this “the very day upon which it was customary to take the Paschal lamb from the flock and bring it into the house, decked out with flowers and ribbons.”<sup>27</sup> And we know for what this creature is being prepared.

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<sup>24</sup> Pere M.-J. LaGrange, O.P., *The Gospel of Jesus Christ*, vol. II (Westminster, MD: The Newman Bookshop, 1938), 123.

<sup>25</sup> Mitch and Sri, *Matthew*, 265

<sup>26</sup> Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 8. Unlike many commentators, Benedict makes the point that Jesus “did not appear to have any importance for Jerusalem, and the people there did not know him. The crowd that paid homage to Jesus at the gateway to the city was not the same crowd that later demanded his crucifixion.” (8)

<sup>27</sup> Maurice Meschler S.J., *The Life of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, vol. 2 (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1950), 170.

Mark 11:1-10

For Mark, Jerusalem is a focal point of the story of Jesus (six of sixteen chapters are set in Jerusalem plus the final journey there make up more than half the gospel); “[I]t is the central dynamic of the gospel”:

- Following Jesus means following him *on the way*.
- *The way* leads to Jerusalem.
- Jerusalem is the place of *confrontation with the authorities*.
- Jerusalem is the place of *death and resurrection*.<sup>28</sup>

Mark mentions Bethany as the point of departure for the two disciples who were to fetch the colt for Jesus. Because Mark tells us, in the verse immediately following this episode (11:11), that Jesus returned to Bethany after going to the temple, it is likely that Jesus spent each night through Thursday at the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.<sup>29</sup> Mark makes special note of a “colt...on which no one has ever sat” (11:2). This recalls “Old Testament stipulations that an animal devoted to a sacred purpose must be one that has not been put to any ordinary use (Num 19:2; Deut 21:3; 1 Sam 6:7).”<sup>30</sup> St. Ambrose sees in this revelation that “no man before Christ had called the people of the Gentiles into the Church.”<sup>31</sup> In this mission to retrieve the young donkey, Jesus instructs the disciples to tell anyone who asks that “the Master has need of it” (11:3). “‘Master’ is literally ‘the Lord’...the sacred name of God; it is the only time in Mark that Jesus explicitly refers to himself as the Lord.”<sup>32</sup> Implied here is that Jesus knew what His fate would soon be because He had made arrangements with the animal’s owner in advance of

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<sup>28</sup> Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007) 26-27, italics in original.

<sup>29</sup> *NIV Archaeological Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 1647.

<sup>30</sup> Healy, *Mark*, 221.

<sup>31</sup> Toal, *Sermons*, 171.

<sup>32</sup> Healy, *Mark*, 222.

His visit.<sup>33</sup> Pierre Bernard goes so far as to say that the owner was a friend and that Jesus wishes to take the animal “without their permission, as if to avoid compromising them on his account”<sup>34</sup> but, even so, with the intention of returning it post haste. Joseph Huby, speculates that Jesus was already well known in the village and the “owner of the colt, assured of getting it back after a brief absence, must have felt honored by furnishing a mount for the celebrated prophet in a procession which promised to be a triumph.”<sup>35</sup> (We will get a different understanding about this specific episode from Luke, as we shall see.)

In Mark, we hear again about the garments being thrown to the ground before the Lord. St. Bede (*In Marcum*) applies this to “the flesh of Christian martyrs, who lay down their lives for the gospel and so proclaim the Lordship of Jesus Christ.”<sup>36</sup> Although, Pope Benedict reminds us, invoking another common theme of the Church Fathers, that it is not only those who make the ultimate sacrifice that are asked to lay down their cloaks, but also “we must spread out our lives, ourselves, in an attitude of gratitude and adoration.”<sup>37</sup> The waving of the palm branches evokes Simon Maccabeus triumphal entry into the city after his successful revolt (1 Macc 13:51).<sup>38</sup> Note, too, the use of the expression “our father David.” This is an unprecedented use of such a formulation since it had previously always been applied to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.<sup>39</sup> Maybe

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<sup>33</sup> Healy, *Mark*, 222.

<sup>34</sup> Pierre R. Bernard, O.P., *The Mystery of Jesus*, Volume 2 (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1966), 168.

<sup>35</sup> Joseph Huby, S.J., *The Word of Salvation: Translation and Explanation of the Gospel According to Mark* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1957), 769-70.

<sup>36</sup> Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, *The Gospel of Mark*. The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2001), 38.

<sup>37</sup> Benedict XVI (1 April 2012), Palm Sunday Homily. Retrieved from [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2012/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_hom\\_20120401\\_palm-sunday.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2012/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20120401_palm-sunday.html)

<sup>38</sup> Healy, *Mark*, 222.

<sup>39</sup> Reginald C. Fuller, gen. ed., *A New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* (Nashville and New York: Nelson, 1975), 972.

the crowd was thinking of Jesus as Son of David (as we heard in Matthew) and some exclaimed this phrase in their enthusiasm.

Also, according to Jerome, we hear only in Mark of a distinction between “[t]he multitudes that went *before* and that *followed*, [which] showed that both peoples, those who believed in the Lord *before* the Gospel, and those who believed *after*, with one voice praise and confess the Lord.”<sup>40</sup> St. John Chrysostom takes a similar tack, referring to those who prophesied the coming of Christ versus those who believed when they saw its fulfillment.<sup>41</sup>

I close this review of Mark’s account with this beautiful reflection on Christ’s humility, inspired by His mounting the colt, from St. Augustine:

What great thing was it to the king of the ages to become the king of humanity?...He was the king of Israel in that he rules minds, in that he gives counsel for eternity, in that he leads into the kingdom of heaven for those who believe, hope, and love. It is a condescension...to become the king of Israel. It is an indication of pity, not an increase in power.<sup>42</sup>

### [Luke 19:29-38](#)

Luke is distinctive in speaking here of Jesus “going up” to Jerusalem. He is “ascending to the holy place, where sacrifices were offered to God...our Lord’s whole life is seen in terms of a continuous ascent towards Jerusalem, where his self-surrender reaches its highpoint in the redemptive sacrifice of the Cross.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Toal. *Sermons*, 164 (italics added).

<sup>41</sup> Toal. *Sermons*, 164.

<sup>42</sup> Thomas C. Oden, gen. ed., *Mark: Ancient Christian Commentary on Sacred Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 155-56.

<sup>43</sup> *Saint Luke’s Gospel: The Navarre Bible* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1988), 211.

Unlike in Mark, Luke tells us that the owners (not just mere bystanders) questioned the disciples when they untied the colt. So, this seems to indicate foreknowledge but not active prearrangements on the part of Jesus<sup>44</sup> (in contrast to the commentary we heard when discussing Mark). This emphasizes my earlier point of the interest and importance we can attribute to even the smallest details in Scripture. Also note that Jesus “has need of” the animal. Fulton Sheen, in his *Life of Christ*, reflects that “[p]erhaps no greater paradox was ever written than this—on the one hand the sovereignty of the Lord, and on the other his ‘need’... Sometimes God pre-empt[s] and requisitions the things of man, as if to remind him that everything is a gift from Him.”<sup>45</sup>

In the crowd’s exclamation at the end of this passage we read, “Peace in heaven and glory in the highest” (19:38). Do we not hear strains of the Nativity story here (“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased” – Lk 2:14)?<sup>46</sup> Bookends to a life well-lived in which Christ is about to accomplish the reason for which He became incarnate.

Finally, in the last words of this pericope<sup>47</sup> (v. 40), we confirm Jesus’ intent to make Himself known. Whereas earlier He “imposed silence on those who want to make him King or Messiah, [recall the ‘Messianic Secret’]... now he adopts a different attitude: the moment has come for his dignity and mission to be made public.”<sup>48</sup> St. Ephrem the Syrian adds that the stones crying out “was reserved for later, because the stones were crying out at the time of his

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<sup>44</sup> George Martin. *Bringing the Gospel of Luke to Life: Insight and Inspiration* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2011), 511-12.

<sup>45</sup> Fulton J. Sheen. *Life of Christ* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1958), 273.

<sup>46</sup> Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch. *The Gospel of Luke*. The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2001), 58.

<sup>47</sup> Simply, a passage from the Bible.

<sup>48</sup> *Saint Luke’s Gospel*: The Navarre Bible (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1988), 213.

crucifixion” (recall: *The earth quaked, rocks were split, tombs were opened* in the account of the moment of Jesus’ death in Matthew [27:51-52].<sup>49</sup>) Bp. Sheen again: “Stones are hard, but if they would cry out, then how much harder must be the hearts of men who would not recognize God’s mercy before them.”<sup>50</sup> Understandably, Pierre Bernard attributes Jesus’ exclamation on this point as His being “under the impetus of the enthusiasm [of the crowd] and that he allowed to well up in his heart the emotion of great moments.”<sup>51</sup>

### John 12:12-19

John is the only evangelist to mention that people in Jerusalem knew in advance of Jesus’ coming to their city. Was it pilgrims who traveled with Jesus from Jericho through Bethany (some of whom may have seen the raising of Lazarus – Jn 11:1-44) and then went ahead of Him who alerted the City of David? Or might it have been Sanhedrin spies (Jn 11:57) who let them know?<sup>52</sup> Maybe both.

In any case, “it was customary for the citizens of the holy city to go out to meet the largest or most important groups of pilgrims and conduct them into it amid singing and other joyous manifestations.”<sup>53</sup> (J. Jeremias estimates 55,000 inhabitants plus another 125,000 pilgrims for Passover with many arriving early as was called for and practically advisable.<sup>54</sup>) In describing those that came out to meet Jesus, aside from their exclamations, he only mentions

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<sup>49</sup> Thomas C. Oden, gen. ed. *Luke: Ancient Christian Commentary on Sacred Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 299.

<sup>50</sup> Fulton J. Sheen. *Life of Christ* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1958), 276.

<sup>51</sup> Bernard, *Mystery of Jesus*, 171.

<sup>52</sup> Giuseppe Ricciotti, *The Life of Christ* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1947), 518.

<sup>53</sup> Ricciotti, *Life of Christ*, 519.

<sup>54</sup> J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 77-84 as referenced in Joachim Gnilka, *Jesus of Nazareth: Message and History* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1997), 272.

their carrying palm branches (the only gospel writer to specifically mention this type of vegetation, evoking Leviticus (23:40) and 2 Maccabees (10:6-7)).<sup>55</sup> For the crowd, these palms were “a symbol of Jewish nationalism and liberation, because they receive him as a messianic deliverer who will liberate them from Roman occupation.”<sup>56</sup> Since palms are not native to Jerusalem, they may have come from Jericho<sup>57</sup> (which was on Jesus’ route to Jerusalem and from which a great multitude followed Him [see Mt 20:29, Mk 10:46, Lk 19:1]).

Since we are discussing *Palm Sunday*, let’s learn a bit more about their significance.<sup>58</sup>

1. They “were a longstanding sign of victory in the Greek world” and were recognized by Roman writers in this way as well.
2. “Palm branches were associated with the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles (Lev 23:40).
3. They were part of “the *lulab* [consisting of palms, myrtle, and willow tied together] shaken at the recitation of Psalm 118:25” (“Hosanna!) during that feast
4. The Maccabees used them “as part of the rededication ceremony for the temple (2 Macc 10:7)” as well as picturing them on [coins](#).
5. They make another appearance in John’s writings in Revelation (7:9) which “portrays Christians who have overcome the persecutions of this world as waving palm branches and wearing white robes.”

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<sup>55</sup> Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, *The Gospel of John*. The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2003), 41.

<sup>56</sup> Francis Martin and William M. Wright IV, *The Gospel of John*. Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 220.

<sup>57</sup> *NIV Archaeological Study Bible*, 1597. A number of older works I consulted referred to the palm tree-lined streets along the procession route but this may well be a pious rendering of events.

<sup>58</sup> All information in the next five points from *NIV Archaeological Study Bible*, 2056.

Romanus Melodus gives us a lovely poem on the palms of victory over death. An excerpt:

O Lover of man, the holy church holds a high festival,  
faithfully calling together her children;  
It meets thee with palms and spreads out garments of joy  
So that with thy disciples and with Thy friend,  
Thou mayest advance and legislate a deep peace for Thy servants,  
And release them from oppression, as formerly Thou hast checked  
The tears of Mary and Martha.<sup>59</sup>

For a last word on the significance of palms, let us turn again to the great St. Augustine of Hippo: “The branches of palms are psalms of praise for the victory that our Lord was about to obtain by his death over death and his triumph over the devil, the prince of death, by the trophy of the cross.”<sup>60</sup>

Getting back to the crowds, their invoking Jesus as “*King of Israel*,” only mentioned in this gospel account, reinforces this idea of Him as temporal overthrower of oppression who will rule in righteousness, as we find in Zephaniah (*The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst, / you have no further misfortune to fear* – 3:15).<sup>61</sup>

Jesus acknowledges this kingship by His riding in on an ass, evoking Zechariah 9, as we have already encountered. “For the multitudes the triumphal entry into Jerusalem was to be the first spark of a vast conflagration to come; for Jesus it was the only official display of his messianic royalty.”<sup>62</sup> “If he dies, it will be plain to all eyes that he has not hidden his glory, but

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<sup>59</sup> Thomas C. Oden, gen. ed. *John 11-21: Ancient Christian Commentary on Sacred Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 52.

<sup>60</sup> Oden, *John 11-21*, 52.

<sup>61</sup> Martin and Wright, *John*, 220.

<sup>62</sup> Ricciotti, *Life of Christ*, 520-21. Ricciotti makes an important additional point: While Jesus’ royalty had to be made manifest officially He did it so near the end of His days that there would be “little probability that the mistaken political interpretation [of the multitudes] would take root.”

has solemnly claimed the title and prerogatives of the Messiah.”<sup>63</sup> But there is an important distinction to make:

We should appreciate the juxtaposition of the crowd's understanding of Jesus as king alongside Jesus' own display of kingship in light of Zech 9:9. The crowd is correct to hail Jesus as king. But his kingship is not exactly what they think. Jesus does not come riding a war horse as a conquering warrior. He comes as a king who lays down his life and rides atop a lowly beast of burden. Jesus has not come to defeat the Romans and win political freedom but to defeat Satan, "the ruler of this world" (12:31), and win freedom from the more serious slavery of sin (8:34-36). He has come to "proclaim peace to the nations" (Zech 9:10). This peace comes not through military conquest but through participation in the divine communion, which Jesus' cross and resurrection make possible (John 14:27; 20:21).<sup>64</sup>

So “Jesus refuses to fit into the mold that human beings try to create for him. He defies our expectations and often does not act the way we want him to act.”<sup>65</sup>

Then John notes the lack of understanding of the disciples at the time of these events, but how they were subsequently enlightened after the Resurrection. “The Holy Spirit inspired the memory of the apostles not only to recall the prophecies and events of the past, but to understand them in terms of the Father’s saving plan (2:22; 14:26).”<sup>66</sup> But at the time, “the disciples were still too much under the influence of the emotion of the populace to rise to higher and more spiritual considerations regarding the brief human triumph of the Master.”<sup>67</sup>

The section closes with a note about from where the crowds come and what has fueled their enthusiasm: namely, the raising of Lazarus. Only John records this miracle and he puts it as an almost immediate precursor to the entry into Jerusalem (remember Jesus came from Bethany

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<sup>63</sup> Huby, *The Word of Salvation*, 772.

<sup>64</sup> Martin and Wright, *John*, 221.

<sup>65</sup> Martin and Wright, *John*, 222.

<sup>66</sup> Hahn and Mitch, *John*, 41.

<sup>67</sup> Ricciotti, *Life of Christ*, 522.

and likely stayed with the sisters and their brother during the early part of Holy Week). It is what pushed the Pharisees over the edge and cemented their plot to be rid of Jesus (as well as Lazarus). These Pharisees bemoan the fact that the “whole world has gone after him,” that is, “the whole human race which Christ came to save.”<sup>68</sup> “[E]ven though they did not know it, the Pharisees were telling the truth...for not only Jews but Gentiles as well were destined to accept the faith.”<sup>69</sup> “Their fear that people will rally around Jesus as a messianic conqueror seems to be materializing.”<sup>70</sup> Giuseppe Ricciotti explains further:

Jesus’...unquestioned triumph must have driven the Pharisees nearly mad. When they balanced up what they had accomplished with all their plans to seize Jesus, to have spies reporting on him, to put him to death along with Lazarus, they had to admit complete failure. Jesus was moving freely about Jerusalem itself, his life and Lazarus’[s] were protected by the ardent enthusiasm of the people, he kept winning more and more followers and he even dared to make a triumphal entry into the holy city. The Pharisees themselves recognized their defeat...<sup>71</sup>

But not their surrender.

### Why and How our Saviour Celebrates this Triumph

I wish to add to this section, in which we worked through the entry narrative of each evangelist, with a concise overview, from the Jesuit priest, Maurice Meschler, of why and how Jesus celebrated this triumphal procession. First the why:

1. “[I]t had been prophesied that the Messiah would take possession of the city and Temple in this manner (Zech 9:9).”

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<sup>68</sup> Fuller, *Catholic Commentary*, 972.

<sup>69</sup> Oden, *John 11-21*, 56.

<sup>70</sup> Martin and Wright, *John*, 221.

<sup>71</sup> Ricciotti, *Life of Christ*, 522.

2. “[O]ur Saviour wished to deprive His enemies of their last pretext for unbelief.”  
They expected a Messiah coming in power and glory, yet here Jesus comes in triumphant with the accolades of the crowd, noting that Jesus had told them that they would see Him again with the cries “Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord.”
3. “He intended to prove that His future Passion and Death were voluntary and of his own free choice. A man who held such sway over the minds of the people could also hold his own against his enemies.”
4. [O]ur Saviour wished to add to the disgrace of His Death by the contrast with the glory of this triumph...as regards both time and place.”

And now the how:

1. In humility, knowing that temporal greatness and glory are fleeting – today celebration, before the week is out, torture and death.
2. With compassion, as Jesus weeps over the city He has entered which He knows will soon be destroyed in punishment for its blindness.
3. In anguish, as He notes all the places that will soon be the scenes of His trial, passion, and demise, and the persons instrumental in effecting this, most notably Judas walking beside Him, the citizens questioning who He was, and the Pharisees hoping to quiet the throngs. In a sense, “[i]t was really for Him more like a funeral procession than a triumph.”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> The entire section is taken from Maurice Meschler S.J. *The Life of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, vol. 2 (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1950), 168-70

**RECENT POPES**

Although I incorporated some ancient wisdom from the Church Fathers into what we already covered, I thought it best to separate into a new section the much more recent reflections our current Holy Father and his two predecessors wished to relay regarding Jesus' triumphal march. As you would imagine, these Vicars of Christ often talk on this day about the Passion narrative, but they do touch on, and sometimes delve into, what we are focusing on here: Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. It is from these references that I take these observations of theirs.

**John Paul II**

In our beloved Pope St. John Paul II's first Palm Sunday homily as Bishop of Rome, he said this, focusing on Christ's disposition on this last journey:

Jesus enters Jerusalem on the donkey lent to him. The crowd seems nearer to the fulfilment of the promise for which so many generations had lived. The shouts, "Hosanna... Blessed be he who comes in the name of the Lord!", seem to want to express the meeting, now near, of human hearts with the eternal Choice. In the midst of this joy which precedes the Passover solemnities, Jesus is meditative and silent. He is fully aware that that meeting of human hearts with the eternal Choice *will not take place by means of the "Hosannas", but by means of the cross.*<sup>73</sup>

Like the great shepherd he was, John Paul was constantly focused on making relevant to us today the gospel. He emphasizes something in these passages that any Mass-goer would quickly understand: "Since that day, the Church throughout the world has repeated the words of the crowd in Jerusalem: 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord'. She repeats it every day while celebrating the Eucharist, shortly before the consecration. She repeats it with particular

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<sup>73</sup> John Paul II (8 April 1979). *Palm Sunday Homily*. no. 2. Retrieved from [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1979/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_hom\\_19790408\\_palme.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1979/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19790408_palme.html)

emphasis today, Palm Sunday.”<sup>74</sup> The Lord comes to us in the Eucharist and we should exclaim this awesome gift and privilege with the enthusiasm of the crowds on that first Palm Sunday.

After all, we have had two thousand years to contemplate it!

No deep reflection on Jesus’ last visit to Jerusalem can avoid considering the Passion, despite the joyous welcome He received upon arrival. John Paul addresses this at the end of the last millennium:

The celebration of Holy Week begins with the "*Hosanna!*" of Palm Sunday and culminates in the "*Crucify him!*" of Good Friday. But this is not a contradiction; rather it is the heart of the mystery the liturgy wants to proclaim: Jesus willingly gave himself up to his passion; he did not find himself crushed by superior forces (cf. Jn 10:18). It was he himself who, in discerning the Father's will, understood that his hour had come and he accepted it with the free obedience of the Son and with infinite love for mankind.<sup>75</sup>

He goes on to apply this as a life lesson: “we must not be discouraged by defeat nor exalted by victory because, as with Christ, the only victory is fidelity to the mission received from the Father.”<sup>76</sup> Life will be filled with highs and lows, triumphs and tragedies. For us, we must simply do our best to discern God’s will, be submissive to it, and follow it so that the final victory over eternal death will be ours.

In fact, John Paul emphasizes this in his final Palm Sunday homily, given almost a year to the day before his death, speaking of the same crowd that welcomed the Lord with shouts of “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord” (Lk 19:38) would “a few days later...reject him with hostile cries: ‘Crucify him! Crucify him! (Lk 23:21). The Palm Sunday

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<sup>74</sup> John Paul II (23 March 1997). *Palm Sunday Homily*. no. 1. Retrieved from [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1997/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_hom\\_19970323.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1997/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19970323.html)

<sup>75</sup> John Paul II (28 March 1999), *Palm Sunday Homily*. no. 1. Retrieved from [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1999/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_hom\\_19990328.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19990328.html)

<sup>76</sup> John Paul II (28 March 1999), *Homily*. no. 2.

liturgy...plunges us into that fickle crowd which in a few days veered from joyful enthusiasm to murderous contempt.”<sup>77</sup>

## Benedict XVI

As we turn to John Paul’s successor, Pope Benedict XVI, we rightly expect that this world-class biblical theologian would soak his homilies with biblical exegesis. We are not disappointed. We only have time for a few brief insights here, but I encourage you to dive into his homilies (as you should consider doing with all papal homilies) at your leisure, especially during the seasons of Lent, Easter, Advent, and Christmas.

In his first Palm Sunday homily, Benedict brings out three important points in Zechariah’s prophecy about the future messiah (Zech 9:9-10):

1. He will be “a king of the poor...above all an inner freedom from the greed for possession and the mania for power...[i]t is first and foremost a matter of purification of heart.”
2. He will be “a king of peace...he will break bows...[t]he Cross is a broken bow...[t]he new weapon that Jesus places in our hands is the Cross – a sign of reconciliation, of forgiveness, a sign of love that is stronger than death.”
3. It contains the “preannouncement of universality...[Christ’s] country is the earth, the whole world.”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> John Paul II (4 April 2004), *Palm Sunday Homily*. no. 1. Retrieved from [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/2004/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_hom\\_20040404\\_palm-sunday.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/2004/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_20040404_palm-sunday.html)

<sup>78</sup> Benedict XVI (9 April 2006), *Palm Sunday Homily*. Retrieved from [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2006/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_hom\\_20060409\\_palm-sunday.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2006/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20060409_palm-sunday.html)

Continuing this emphasis on Jesus' kingship, our Bavarian shepherd, the following year shares this life-centering message as he reflects on the Procession of the Palms:

Recognizing [Jesus Christ] as King means accepting him as the One who shows us the way, in whom we trust and whom we follow. It means accepting his Word day after day as a valid criterion for our life. It means seeing in him the authority to which we submit. We submit to him because his authority is the authority of the truth.<sup>79</sup>

His emphasis on peace in 2010 is particularly relevant in these dangerous and chaotic times. The shouts of "peace on earth" belie the crowd's knowledge that there is *not* peace on earth.

[T]hey know that the place of peace is Heaven[. T]hey know that it is an essential part of Heaven to be a haven of peace. This acclamation is therefore an expression of profound suffering and, at the same time, a prayer of hope; may the One who comes in the Name of the Lord bring to the earth what there is in Heaven. May his kingship become the kingship of God, the presence of Heaven on earth. ... We know that Heaven is Heaven, a place of glory and peace because the will of God totally prevails there. And we know that the earth will not be Heaven as long as God's will is not done on it.<sup>80</sup>

Benedict's last Palm Sunday homily gives us this wonderful reflection for the coming Holy Week and one that is worth contemplating for the rest of our lives. The majority of the crowd, he says,

was disappointed by the way Jesus chose to present himself as Messiah and King of Israel. This is the heart of today's feast, for us too. Who is Jesus of Nazareth for us? What idea do we have of the Messiah, what idea do we have of God? It is a crucial question, one we cannot avoid, not least because during this very week we are called to follow our King who chooses the Cross as his throne. We are called to follow a Messiah who promises us, not a facile earthly happiness, but the happiness of heaven, divine beatitude. So we must ask ourselves: what are our true expectations? What are our

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<sup>79</sup> Benedict XVI (1 April 2007), Palm Sunday Homily. Retrieved from [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2007/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_hom\\_20070401\\_palm-sunday.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20070401_palm-sunday.html)

<sup>80</sup> Benedict XVI (28 March 2010), Palm Sunday Homily. Retrieved from [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2010/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_hom\\_20100328\\_palm-sunday.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20100328_palm-sunday.html)

deepest desires, with which we have come here today to celebrate Palm Sunday and to begin our celebration of Holy Week?<sup>81</sup>

Allow me to share one last reflection from Benedict, this from his *Jesus of Nazareth*

series of books:

The Church greets the Lord in the Holy Eucharist as the one who is coming now, the one who has entered into her midst. At the same time, she greets him as the one who continues to come, the one who leads us toward his coming. As pilgrims, we go up to him; as a pilgrim, he comes to us and takes us up with him in his “ascent” to the Cross and Resurrection, to the definitive Jerusalem that is already growing in the midst of this world in the communion that unites us with his body.<sup>82</sup>

### Pope Francis

Finally, let us turn to our current Holy Father for words of wisdom from his last two Palm Sunday homilies. His style is to focus especially on personal application, primarily from reflections on the Passion narratives. But he does not ignore Palm Sunday as we will now note.

Firstly, let us look at his words on enthusiasm. We know of Francis’s *Joy of the Gospel* (his 2013 Apostolic Exhortation *[Evangelii Gaudium](#)*), and his emphasis on Christians not being dour<sup>83</sup>. He sees in the processing crowd a lesson for us today:

Jesus is pleased with the crowd’s showing their affection for him. When the Pharisees ask him to silence the children and the others who are acclaiming him, he responds: “I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out” (*Lk* 19:40). Nothing could dampen their enthusiasm for Jesus’ entry. May nothing prevent us from finding in him the source of our joy, true joy, which abides and brings peace; for it is Jesus alone who saves us from the snares of sin, death, fear and sadness.<sup>84</sup>

And one last pope quote, which directs our thoughts to the solemnity of Holy Week:

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<sup>81</sup> Benedict XVI (1 April 2012), Palm Sunday Homily. Retrieved from [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2012/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_hom\\_20120401\\_palm-sunday.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2012/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20120401_palm-sunday.html)

<sup>82</sup> Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 11.

<sup>83</sup> One of many examples: <http://www.uscatholic.org/blog/201606/smile-more-pope-francis-30667>

<sup>84</sup> Francis (20 March 2016), Palm Sunday Homily. Retrieved from [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2016/documents/papa-francesco\\_20160320\\_omelia-palme.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20160320_omelia-palme.html)

Jesus who, in fulfilment of the Scriptures, enters the holy city in this way [i.e. with “joyful welcome”] is no misguided purveyor of illusions, no new age prophet, no imposter. Rather, he is clearly a Messiah who comes in the guise of a servant, the servant of God and of man, and goes to his passion. He is the great “patient”, who suffers all the pain of humanity.

So as we joyfully acclaim our King, let us also think of the sufferings that he will have to endure in this week. Let us think of the slanders and insults, the snares and betrayals, the abandonment to an unjust judgment, the blows, the lashes and the crown of thorns... And lastly, the way of the cross leading to the crucifixion.<sup>85</sup>

### CONCLUSION (WITH PERSONAL REFLECTION)

We are blessed to have so many wonderful scholars and thinkers from which to draw such tremendous knowledge and insights. I encourage you to continue what was begun here by following up with your favorite books and authors, whether it be on this topic or any other area of interest in the Bible, or any aspect of the Faith, for that matter. Resources are plentiful, whether it be at a local Christian or specifically Catholic college, university, or seminary, a theological library, or the internet. It is also likely that your local public library can get you just about anything.

I would like to close with a brief reflection of my own.

I am particularly struck by the use of the word “sent” in all three Synoptic Gospels. Jesus sends two disciples to fetch the animal on which He will be riding when He enters Jerusalem for the last time. You likely have heard that the word for “sent” in Greek is ἀποστέλλω (*apostellō*) or “apostle.” The Lord sends two of His, undoubtedly, most trusted followers to complete this vital task (we saw how important several elements were in this final trip to display Christ’s royal

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<sup>85</sup> Francis (9 April 2017), Palm Sunday Homily. Retrieved from [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2017/documents/papa-francesco\\_20170409\\_omelia-palme.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2017/documents/papa-francesco_20170409_omelia-palme.html)

claim). Jesus only had one chance to make this ultimate appearance at the city gates and He needed it to go perfectly.

These two fulfilled their duties superbly, following Jesus' directions to the letter, relaying precisely what He told them. No doubt they went in haste, eager to do what He asked. Invoking "the Lord" to those who questioned them, they were permitted to take the animals without hesitation. Coming back, they laid their garments on the colt for Jesus' comfort and no doubt to show deference to Him.

Is this not a striking example for us today? Can we not see ourselves as the *apostellō* "sent" to do the Lord's bidding and advance His mission in this world, as those disciples did on that fateful day?

Recall the Great Commission found at the end of Matthew's Gospel (28:19-20):

*Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.*

Go! Christ says. You are sent to spread the Good News to the whole world. Tell them that "the Lord" has sent you. Be Me to others and see Me in others and by your efforts my message of love will be permitted to be accepted by many. Make haste, do not delay! Time is short and my triumphal entry into those hearts is what I desire so that through the Paschal Mystery many souls may come to know me and be saved. Rid yourselves of those excess "garments" that are holding you back from getting on with this important work entrusted to you; offer these challenges and difficulties to Me so that I can give you peace.