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A little boy was asked what he learned about Palm Sunday. *"Its like this, he said. You put your hands in the air like this, and wave your palms (of your hand)!* I feel sorry for the Sunday school teacher. All those hours of preparing to narrate the event, to anticipate eager-eyed and bushy tailed little 'uns do the *ahs!* and *oohs!* and *wows!*, and then to lose **THE** most important object (*not person!*) in the telling of the story, must be really devastating!

It's a pity, not many churches have children and adults waving palm branches as they process into Church on Palm Sunday.

We are now a modern society, and feel silly waving palm fronds in Church, but would not hesitate to join in a Mexican wave at Wembley!

I want to use two texts today, one we have heard read to us by three very eloquent readers. The second is John 12, which has chronological detail.

A fortnight or so prior to "Palm Sunday", Jesus arrived at Mary and Martha's home, when He raised Lazarus from the dead. Word of this spectacular event spread like wild fire across the land, and everyone wanted to see the Miracle Worker! John says,

*The result of all this was that several Jews who had come to Mary, and who had seen what Jesus had done, believed in Him. But some of them went off to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done¹. So the chief priests and the Pharisees called an assembly. **'What are we going to do?'**, they asked. **'This man is performing lots of miracles. If we let Him go on like this, everyone is going to believe in Him! Then the Romans will come and take away our holy place, and our nation!'**² ... **And so they plotted to kill Jesus and Lazarus as well, because of whom people were flocking to Jesus.**³*

When, like the Chief Priests and Pharisees, we blinker our view of the world around us, to see only what we want to see, when all we do is plot

¹ double agent; whistle blower; snitch; squealer.

² John 11:45-48

³ John 12:9-11

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and plan and complain things are not going the way we planned, or expected, or want it to go, we miss seeing and understanding what God **is** doing. This was the heart and mind of the Chief Priests and Pharisees.

There is a saying, *time and tide wait for no one*; well it's absolutely true of God - He waits for no one. He has a plan to restore His creation, which includes us, to its original state. The Chief Priests and Pharisees were so blinkered in their understanding of God, they could not understand what God was doing in their midst.

Returning to our story. As the crowds grew at Lazarus' home, to spare Mary and Martha them from hosting all who visited, Jesus left for another village and stayed there for a few days. Six days before the Passover feast⁴, Jesus returned to the Lazarus' home. During dinner on the last day of His stay with them⁵, Mary anointed Jesus' feet with a very expensive perfume, which Judas the Treasurer said, could have been sold and the proceeds given to the poor and needy; why waste it pouring it so lavishly on Jesus' feet!

So often we get our values mixed up, don't we. There is nothing wrong in selling valuables to meet the needs of the poor and needy, and God does speak to people to do so, but to express our love for God by doing something personal, is an act of extreme gratitude and of high worship, surrendering to God, all we have received from Him.

It's like a child who enters Daddy's office, takes Daddy's paper, picks a handful of Daddy's coloured pens (or may Daddy gave her a box of crayons), sits at Daddy's desk, to draw a picture and give it Daddy with those precious words, *I made it for you, Daddy!* What a lovely image of worship! Its a cynical father who thinks, *I wonder what she has done?!*, and our Father in Heaven, does not think like.

Early on the first day of the week, Jesus sends two disciples to a small hamlet nearby, asking them to bring Him a donkey tied to a post. Should

⁴ John 12:1

⁵ John 12:12

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anyone ask what they are doing, tell them says Jesus, *The Lord has need of it.*

It could well have been the supernatural work of God, of which Jesus is a part, that the heart of the donkey's owner is moved not to protest (*knowing that the donkey would find its way home*), or it could be, during His many travels to and from Jerusalem, Jesus met the owner of the donkey and the encounter turned his life around, or Jesus healed him or someone in his family, and the donkey's owner might have said, *Anything you need Lord, anytime... you only need to ask!"*

Lest we think otherwise, Jesus is not telling his disciples to engage in "**grand theft donkey**", rather taking up a long-standing offer, made by a grateful friend.

The donkey arrives; the disciples create a makeshift saddle for Jesus, draping their coats and cloaks over the donkey's back, and the procession begins; the crowd grows to a significant size of thousands as they process into Jerusalem. Remember, it was the time of the Passover and many people were in Jerusalem or travelling to it.

It was a day of mixed emotions for Jesus. Leaving the home of his dear friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus would have been sorrowful, knowing He would not be seeing them again, except when they meet in God's re-established Kingdom.

Sorrow gave way to joy as crowds of sang praises to God; what else would have brought Jesus greater joy, than to hear praises to His Father?

The procession would have taken the better part of the day as they made their way down into the Kidron Valley and up towards the Temple.

As they approached Jerusalem, with the Temple in full view before Him, Jesus breaks down; with deep sadness He weeps and laments over a place on earth, where Abraham first setup a place of worship; where so many people and leaders worshipped God and took His instruction, including David, and his son Solomon who built the first Temple, where

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God met with His anointed priests. Jesus experiences a deep mournful sorrow because the day is coming when *your enemies will not leave one stone standing upon another, because you did not know (nor care for) the time of your visitation.*⁶

Exhausted from sitting on the back of the donkey, tired from the din and the noise of singing and people talking and shouting, Jesus enters the Temple, perhaps for a time of peace and quiet, only to find a marketplace of money changers and sellers busy at work.

Lets be perfectly clear: Jesus was not against commerce and trade; it was the selling of doves and sheep, of bottles of anointed oil, and all that was needed for people to offer their sacrifices to God, **at extortionate prices** preventing the poor and the disposed from worshipping God, **this** upset Jesus.

He flew into a rage. *It is written, **My house shall be a house of prayer, but you have changed it into a den of thieves!***

Having cleared the place, Jesus finally resumed His mission, for which He had come. He taught daily in the Temple courtyard. He came, Matthew said, to **teach** disciples who were already familiar with His message, **proclaim** Truth to those unfamiliar with His message, and **heal** every disease and every affliction among the people.⁸

What an eventful 24 hours!

For Jesus, it was an emotional roller-coaster!

For the crowds following Jesus it was joy and celebration.

For those who watched Jesus pass by, a respectful tolerance.

For the Pharisees who could not stand the popularity of the man who was stealing their glory and authority, they were filled with hate.

⁶ Luke 19:41-44

⁷ Luke 19:46

⁸ Matthew 4:23

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And for the traders in the Temple, a frightful moment, not because they had come face to face with the Son of God, but because their money was all over the floor and there was a scramble for it, a free for all!

But there was an elephant in the room, no-one talked about it and none of the Gospel accounts mention it; the unspoken presence of the mighty Roman army garrisoned in Jerusalem, ready to quell any disturbance at a moment's notice. Stoically impassioned, they were well armed, disciplined and ruthless. Their allegiance was to "Rome", the state that paid for their services and gave them authority. As the occupying force, they would have been put on alert, keeping a watchful eye on the crowds, some walking among them, looking out for any sign of "disturbance".

As always, reading or listening to the Word of God, invariably speak to our lives. As we hear the account of Palm Sunday, the question is, ***with which group of people do we identify in our walk with God?***

Are we like Mary, Martha and Lazarus mourning the absence of someone special in our lives, and we cannot see life beyond our mourning?

Are we like the two disciples sent to fetch the donkey, always ready to do what God asks us to do, trusting Him to get things right, but we won't do anything for God's glory on our own initiative?

Are we like Mary, who took the initiative to bathe Jesus' feet with expensive perfume, deaf to the accusation of wasteful spending?

Are we like the money changers, who don't recognise the presence of God in our worst moments when our world turns upside down, because we are focused on what we have lost, and cannot see and connect with the One who, in the first place, gave what we lost?

Are we like the Roman army whose allegiance to Rome was absolute, that we cannot see Jesus approaching us, and passing us by, because we have sold our loyalty, given our allegiance and exhausted our commitments, to causes and activities which control us?

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Are we like those who lined the street to watch Jesus pass by, a glorious moment when it happened, but life goes back to "normal" when the excitement of His presence has gone?

Or, are we like the disciples and followers of Jesus, who threw their coats and cloaks on the ground, that the donkey would not trip and stumble, and its rider, the Son of God would enjoy a safer, cushioned ride, an act of worship like that Mary who used the most expensive bottle of perfume to wash the feet of her Master?

Hosannah! means **save!**

It is both a cry in desperation, **Save us for we are lost, we are drowning, we are dying,** and it is a happy shout, **We are saved by the One who can save!**

We cannot connect with Palm Sunday by simply waving palm fronds, in the same way as we cannot connect with the Easter Bunny by eating chocolate eggs.

Palm Sunday to us here, today and now, is a time to reflect on our relationship with our Father in Heaven, who sent His Son to redeem our lives.

Today, here and now, from among all the groups of people who were part of Palm Sunday when Jesus rode into town, with which group of people do you identify your relationship with God?

AMEN.