

## **Question: What is the significance of Palm Sunday?**

**Answer:** Palm Sunday is the day we celebrate Jesus' triumphal and peaceful entrance into Jerusalem. The entire entrance sequence by Jesus according to the gospels has many important aspects that involve the participation of Jesus, his disciples, and those witnessing the event. The significance of the story is underlined by the fact that it is found in all four gospels (Mark 11:1-11; Matthew 21:1-11; Luke 19:28-40; John 12:12-19).

Jesus first arrives at the Mount of Olives overlooking Jerusalem after a long journey from the province of Galilee (Mark 11:1). His arrival at the Mount of Olives gives readers of the gospels a sense of anticipation as Jesus prepares to enter the walled city of Jerusalem. The Mount of Olives located outside the city walls is a hill on the eastern side of the city. The Mount would have given Jesus a picture perfect view of the Second Temple eventually destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD. It was called the Mount of Olives because of its ability to produce quality olive trees. Today, the Mount of Olives is covered by an expansive Jewish graveyard. Even in Jesus' day, the Mount was beginning to be used for Jewish burials. The reason for Jewish people wanting to be buried there comes from the Old Testament prophet Zechariah. Zechariah writes at the end of time, the Messiah will return and appear at the Mount of Olives to raise the dead (Zechariah 14:4).

From the Mount of Olives, Jesus told two of his disciples to, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately on entering it, you will find a colt tethered on which no one has ever sat. Untie it and bring it here" (Mark 11:2). The disciples have been directed to go into Bethphage, a town located between Bethany and Jerusalem in Jesus' day (*Sacra Pagina: Mark*, pg 321). Under the instruction of Jesus, they would find a colt, or in Matthew's case, "an ass tied and a colt with it" (Matthew 21:2). In Matthew's gospel there are two animals to be retrieved by the disciples and brought to Jesus. Whether there are one or two animals is not the focus of the story. The point of the story is that Jesus is sending the disciples to fetch an animal so he can fulfill an Old Testament prophecy from Zechariah that reads, "Rejoice heartily, O daughter Zion, shout for joy, O daughter Jerusalem! See, your king shall come to you; a just savior is he, Meek, and riding on an ass, on a colt, the foal of an ass" (Zechariah 9:9). After the disciples have retrieved the animal and brought it to Jesus, he mounts the colt and rides toward the city. The fact that it is a colt that's never been ridden illustrates the purity of the animal upon which the Lord sits (*Sacra Pagina: Mark*, pg 321). Along the way those witnessing the event began to "spread their own garments on the road; others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road" (Matthew 21:8). Our modern use of palms on the Sunday before Easter recreates this momentous event. Like those actual witnesses seeing Jesus ride into the city, we today make fit the road for the meek and humble king of Israel (Zechariah 9:9).

Preparing the way for the king was no new phenomenon. Similar sequences can be found in the Old Testament when kings entered cities, "At once each took his garment, spread it under (the king) on the bare steps" (2 Kings 9:13). The witnesses who laid branches and garments on the road in front of Jesus saw his entrance into the city as the long awaited arrival of the king, or Messiah, who would raise the Israelite people from oppression. It is hard to estimate the number of people who would have watched Jesus enter the city. During Passover which is a major holiday for Jewish people, the city of Jerusalem would have likely doubled in population with pilgrims making their annual visit to the temple (Mark 11:8).

As Jesus processes toward the city gates to "take possession of the city and its temple" (*Sacra Pagina: Mark*, pg 322-323) the crowds shout, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is to come! Hosanna in the highest!" (Mark 11:9-10; Matthew 21:9; Luke 19:38; John 12:13) Hosanna means "save, please," the entire quote of the people comes originally from Psalm 118:25 which reads, "Save us, we beseech you, O Lord!" (*Sacra Pagina: Mark*, pg 322). The witnesses crying these words out exclaimed joyfully that Jesus was the help they had been praying for.

Jesus' triumphal entrance into Jerusalem was not followed by threats of violence and military action on his part. Instead, Jesus' entrance is accompanied by peace and the promise of everlasting life. Perhaps the most radical aspect of Jesus entering Jerusalem is that unlike the kings of old who recaptured their kingdoms through violence, Jesus proclaimed the kingdom by teaching love and peace.