

Cast them Down!

Hespeler, 28 March 2021 © Scott McAndless – Palm Sunday

Isaiah 50:4-9a, Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29, John 12:12-16, Philippians 2:5-11

Today is Palm Sunday and, if people know anything about Palm Sunday it is this: it is all about the palm branches. No matter what else we do on this Sunday, we've got to wave those palm branches, right? I mean, even on this pandemic Palm Sunday, the second pandemic Palm Sunday we've held in a row, we know that we've got to wave those palm branches. Maybe we can't do a parade in procession as we'd like to do. Maybe we can't stand up and sing "*Ride on, ride on in majesty,*" in chorus like we would like to, but we just had better be able to wave those palm branches.

No Palms in the Gospels?

But what if I were to tell you that the palms barely made it into the story of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem? I went through the gospels as I prepared for this Sunday and I was frankly surprised by the lack of palms in the stories of Palm Sunday. Start with the Gospel of Mark, likely the first Gospel written, and there you will see that when Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem, the people covered the road in front of him with their robes and with leafy branches that they cut from trees.

Yes, I admit that those leafy branches *could* have been palm branches, but they also could have been all kinds of other sorts of plants. In any case, Mark mentions nothing about people waving the branches around. If you then turn to the Gospel of Matthew, you get essentially the same report with various kinds of leafy branches thrown on the road. But here's the really big surprise. If you read the account of that day in the Gospel of Luke, there are absolutely no branches mentioned at all. Luke only says that people spread their robes on the road.

Now, what am I saying here? Am I saying that we've got it all wrong and there were no palms on Palm Sunday? Well, of course not. Just because Matthew Mark and Luke don't mention them doesn't mean that they weren't there. But at the very least it seems to indicate that this one thing that we seem to think is so essential to this day was something that the authors of Matthew, Mark and Luke didn't even bother mentioning and they presumably did that for a reason.

Only in the Gospel of John

So where do the palms in Palm Sunday come from? They come from the Gospel of John. Only John tells us specifically what kinds of branches the people cut and John doesn't mention them putting the greenery on the road, leaving us with the idea that maybe they were waving them.

So, what should we make of that? Many scholars think that the Gospel of John was the last one written and may well have been written with a knowledge of at least some of the others. And sometimes John seems to be trying to set the record straight – trying to correct what it sees as wrong impressions left by the other gospels.

I think that everybody knew that palms were an important feature of what happened on the day when Jesus came to Jerusalem. We do know that the traditional association between palms and the triumphal entry is a very ancient tradition in the church.



So, what might be happening is that we are seeing the reluctance of some of the gospel writers to draw attention to a problematic feature in the story.

Symbolic Meaning

Because here is the problem, palms were not just a nice thing for people to wave around because they were in a celebratory mood. No, palms had some very specific symbolic meaning that people would have picked up on right away and it could be that the writers of Matthew, Mark and Luke were a little bit wary of drawing people's attention to that symbolic meaning.

A Maccabean Symbol

So, what did the palm branch mean to people living in the Near East in the early first century? We know that palms had been taken as the symbol of a family of kings that had ruled over Judea within the last few centuries. The Maccabean kings of Judea and Galilee used palm branches as a symbol on coins, seals and insignia. And I do not think that anyone living in Palestine at that time would have forgotten about that.

Who were the Maccabeans? They were the last Jewish kings to rule over the Holy Land. In the middle of the second century BC, they had led a successful rebellion against the Greek kings who had ruled over Judea since the time of Alexander the Great. And the Maccabeans continued to rule until the Romans came along and basically handed their kingdom over to Herod the Great.

And what do you think that the Romans would have thought about the idea of a bunch of Jewish people gathering in the city of Jerusalem and waving around the symbols of the kings that they had put out of power while they hailed some Jew riding on a donkey as a new king? Yes, you are right, I do not think that the Romans would have been happy about it one bit. It is quite possible, therefore, that when Matthew, Mark and Luke went to write their accounts, they could have just decided it was a little bit wiser to not actually mention the palms.

So, the palm branch was a symbol that the Romans could have seen as politically charged and thus it might have been dangerous for the early church to underline their presence on that day. But that is not the whole story. Because, of course, there is a reason why the Maccabeans chose the palm as their symbol.

A Symbol of Victory

The palm branch was recognized, throughout the whole region, as a symbol of victory. We know that at athletic competitions like Panhellenic Games, the winners of the various events did not receive medals and certainly did not receive any cash rewards. All that they received was a crown woven out of laurel leaves and a palm branch. A victorious general would be similarly rewarded. The meaning of such symbols seemed to be important to them. They represented the fact that, just like the palm and laurel leaves would wither and fade, so was the fame of victory likely to fade. But perhaps that was what made it so sweet and meaningful.



An ancient Maccabean coin with a palm branch

The reason why the Maccabeans had adopted the palm branch as their symbol was because of the great, almost miraculous, victory that they had won against the Greeks. And if the people of Jerusalem turned out when Jesus came to town waving palm branches, then they must have been holding out their hope for a similar victory. And what do you suppose the Romans thought about that? What sort of victory would the Romans have assumed they were looking for?

So everyone – both the Romans and anyone in the crowd would have read a lot of meaning – dangerous meaning – into the mere presence of palm branches on that day. Can you understand now why so many gospel writers didn't want to draw attention to them?

But if we can understand the reluctance of the evangelists, can we understand why it is that the people of Jerusalem went and cut down palm branches when they learned that Jesus was coming. Because Jesus didn't tell them to do that, did he? Jesus does seem to have gone out of his way to make sure that he was riding a donkey, but that is the only thing that Jesus arranged for his entry. If the people of Jerusalem spontaneously went out and gathered palm branches, it can only be because they were deeply craving something. They were craving a victory.

We're Craving a Victory

And I can certainly understand that, can't you? After more than a year struggling with limitations and masks, anxiety and fear, I think we all know something about that craving for any kind of victory. That is why we cheer every new milestone in vaccination progress. It is why we applaud every new sign that things might be opening up again.

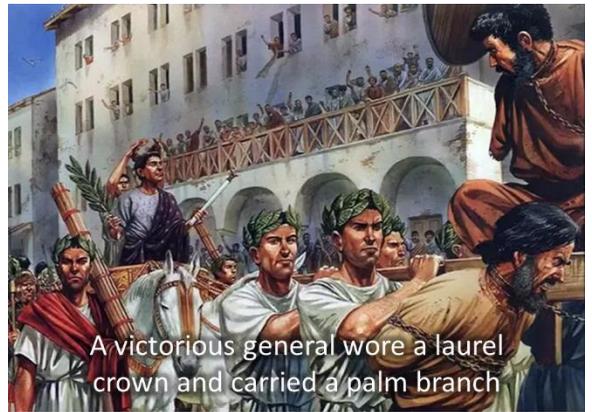
Yes, I know that we've been disappointed too often during this pandemic by cheering for the positive signs. More than a few times, signs of progress have been quickly followed by new depths of disappointment. But that only means that, when we see a victory against this virus that actually holds, our joy will be all the sweeter.

Well, that is what the people of Jerusalem were feeling like when they saw the arrival of Jesus in Jerusalem. They'd had enough of the oppression, the enslavement and the fear of a Roman occupation. They were desperate for any sign of victory and so, yes, when Jesus showed up, they grabbed their palm branches.

And I am sure that Jesus understood and appreciated their need for some sense of victory. He had come to offer it to them, but I'm not quite sure if the victory he was offering was exactly what they were expecting. If they were looking for a victorious general riding upon a horse or a chariot, which would have been how it was done, well, Jesus came riding in on the back of a donkey. If they were looking for the establishment of a new kingdom that would stand against the kingdom of the Romans, well, Jesus had come to announce the arrival of a new kingdom. He called it the kingdom of God.

A Different Kind of Victory

So, yes, Jesus was coming to bring a victory but if they thought that it was going to work like victory usually worked in this world, they had it a bit wrong. Usually, when people seize their victory, they take it



A victorious general wore a laurel crown and carried a palm branch

as an opportunity to exult over their enemies and even to oppress them or abuse them. But the victory that Jesus was bringing was going to be the victory of a servant, the victory of one who would submit even unto death.

And that is maybe where the procession of Jesus into the city of Jerusalem takes a bit of a turn. Because, as we noted, in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, the leafy branches are not waived in the air or held up in a sign of defiance, they are cast to the ground as a sign of submission to the kingdom of God.

Life as a Struggle for Victory

Many of us seem to see life in this world as a continual struggle for victory. We are always trying to win. Winning is measured in different ways at different times. It might be having more money than other people, more power or influence. It might be a matter of being more popular or of having other signs of success as the world measures it. For many people, that is all that life is, a continual scramble for victory. So today I want to offer to you a challenge and I believe that it is the same challenge that Jesus offered to the people of Jerusalem on that day.

Casting Down our Palms

Some of you have brought homemade palm branches or other leaves that you have picked today. Some have also brought woven crowns, another perishable symbol of victory in the ancient world. I invite you to hold up these symbols now. If you don't have the symbols, you may of course imagine yourself holding them.

These are the symbols of the victories that you have had in your life. Your success in work, your dominance in your social networks, the friendship groups and families you have established. These are good things that you have done. You may indeed be proud of your accomplishments. These symbols also represent the goals that you still hold onto and that you would like to accomplish. Wave your palms in celebration of the victories that God has given you in your lives. Be thankful for them.

But now, here is the hard part. We often think of the victories we achieve in life as ends in themselves. But that is not quite right. The people of Jerusalem did celebrate their hope for victory when Jesus arrived, but then they cast their palm branches down before Jesus. They offered up their victories and their hopes of victory to him.

I believe that Jesus calls upon us to do the same thing. Your victories, your accomplishments and indeed all of the things you hope to achieve, become, in Christ, part of something much bigger. If we are going to find a better society for all of us, maybe especially in the difficult months of recovery that are to come, we're all going to need to look beyond individual achievement and victories to something that is for all people. That is the kingdom of God that Jesus came to announce. And his total submission that carried him all the way even to the cross, is a demonstration of the power of any action that gives up the self for the sake of the many.

So here it is our spiritual action for today. Take your palm, take your crown and if you dare cast it down before Jesus, who has come to call us to embrace a better world for all.

A Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, you have granted to many of your people here wonderful victory and success in life. Here we would lay down our palms and our laurel wreaths because we understand that, in you, we find a place to embrace a much larger vision. Amen.