

Holy week. The last days in the earthly life of Jesus Christ. If you read through the Gospels, you cannot help but notice that it is a life filled with symbolism, where every action, every word usually had a deeper, spiritual meaning. The reading that we had before the start of the service, how Jesus triumphantly entered the city of Jerusalem is one such event. Today's readings, in particular the Passion that we have just heard are all designed to call to mind the Way of the cross. If you look around the church you'll see the Stations of the cross, starting with Jesus being condemned to death. However, in many ways it was the entry into Jerusalem itself that was the start of the journey, a journey we share each year: the Way of the Cross. From the moment that he sent his disciples ahead to fetch the donkey, Jesus put into motion a whole series of events that were ultimately to lead him to the cross.

Jesus did not enter Jerusalem blind to the fact that he was heading to his death - he had already announced that fact to his disciples earlier. But Jesus still went, effectively picking up the cross at the instant he sat on the donkey. And the very fact that Jesus rode in at **all** is important. Jesus had walked the whole distance from Galilee to the Mount of Olives some seventy-plus miles. Surely he didn't need to ride for the last two miles. There is a message here. There is the obvious one that Jesus was fulfilling the Old Testament scripture; when the prophet Zechariah announces that the Messiah will come riding on a colt, the foal of an ass. Jesus is saying, "Look, I'm riding on this animal, clearly I **am** the one prophesied about."

But there's more to it than that. Jesus did not use a horse. In the Western hemisphere the ass is somewhat despised but in the East it is a noble animal. Often a king would ride into a city on an ass because it was the beast of peace. If he wanted to chop people's heads off he used a horse! So if you saw someone riding towards you, you could get a pretty fair idea of what was in store simply by looking at the mount.

Christ rode in not on a beast of war but rather a humble donkey. The form of king that he saw himself as was not the aggressive, militaristic kind, the sort out to rule by conquest, but rather a humble, serving one.

And they cut down palm branches and laid these on the ground in front of him. The palm tree is the symbol of Israel - a carving of it was in the Temple, it appeared on the Jewish coins as a symbol of the Jewish nation. It was also traditionally carried before kings on their entry into a city. Clearly, then, the Jews had decided that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, come to rid them of this Roman menace.

If we were in any doubt of this we need only notice the words they called out as he entered. "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessings on him who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the heavens!" a quote from Psalm 118.

Hosanna! The word is normally thought of as a greeting, similar to our word hail or hello, but it meant much more than that. The word literally means "Save now!" It is a cry for help which a people in distress called out to their king and their God; the phrase in the heavens means let even the angels cry out to God "Save now". It is the call of an oppressed people to their saviour and king.

Jesus in this one simple act of entering Jerusalem showed a threefold side to his nature. Firstly, there is his courage. A lesser man would not have chosen to make such a dramatic statement secure in the knowledge that he was already on a hit-list. Discretion is the better part of valour would be most people's motive. But that's not the case with Jesus.

Secondly, there's his claim to be the Messiah, the one to set his people free. The inferences that we have discovered may well have been hidden from the Gentiles, but there is no doubt that the Jews,

in particular, those out to get him, will have been well aware of the claim that he was making.

Thirdly, and perhaps the most important of them all, there's his appeal. He comes not as a warrior but as a servant. He comes not as a king of the throne, but as a king of the heart.

Today we set out on a journey, to accompany Christ on each step of the way. We know, as Jesus did, that the way leads to Golgotha- - to Calvary. But we also know that there is a continuation of the journey, a culmination we will reach next Sunday when, instead of "Hosanna" we can cry out, "Christ is Risen".