

PALM SUNDAY
24/3/24
CAVES BEACH

CALL TO WORSHIP

Jesus, God's Chosen One, is here! Encourager of the weak, opponent of evil, advocate for justice.

"Hosanna!"

Jesus, God's Chosen One, is here! Promised by the prophets, friend of the poor, teacher of the disciples.

"All blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord!"

Jesus, God's Chosen One, is here! Comrade of the oppressed, sign of God's presence, freedom-bringer.

"Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David."

Jesus, God's Chosen One, is here! Son of Joseph and Mary, peace-creator for Zacchaeus, God's Love in action.

"Hosanna in highest heaven!"

OPENING PRAYER

Eternal God, your love is with us as we celebrate the coming of Jesus into Jerusalem:

crowds cheering, palms waving, the disciples enthusiastic.

Your love stays with us as we slink away afraid,

when the cheering is silenced, when the palms are trampled, and when the sound of nailing is heard.

Your love becomes a personal love, a love for our faith community,

**as bread is broken, wine is poured out, and Jesus is graciously remembered. On this glorious, painful day, fill us with your love!
Amen.**

HYMN 348 Ride on, in majesty

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VAh1lzSQ3P4>

PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING & CONFESSION

Swing wide you gates of restoration and wholeness,
we're coming through with shouts of praise!

You are our God, and we give you thanks.

We speak, and you answer.

And what a response –

a glorious salvation response!
And what a story –
the unwelcome stone becomes the key foundation!
This is your doing, God;
You are making a new world.
This is the day you have made.
We will rejoice and be glad in it!
Who is like you, our God?
We lay it all down for you,
for you have bathed us in light.
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!
You are our God and we give you thanks
For you are good, and your steadfast love endures forever.

Life-giving God,
you march headfirst into the wounds of the world with courage,
with honesty, and with a summons for us to become more than we are.
This is the courageous and costly way of bringing healing
into the places that desperately need your light and love.
God, we confess that we so regularly take the option
of sitting back from the hard realities of life.
We talk. We discuss. We judge and accuse.
And nothing really changes.
Forgive us, God, for all the ways we avoid entering into the wounds of the
world.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE

Jesus enters into human lives –
into our brokenness,
into our wrongdoing –
with a scandalous grace that speaks fresh words of love,
that offers fresh words of forgiveness,
and shimmering invitations to begin again.
God loves you. God forgives you.
Let's start again. **Amen.**

READINGS

- **Psalm 118:1–2, 19–29**

1 O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;

his steadfast love endures forever!
2 Let Israel say,
“His steadfast love endures forever.”
19 Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the Lord.
20 This is the gate of the Lord;
the righteous shall enter through it.
21 I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.
22 The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.
23 This is the Lord’s doing;
it is marvellous in our eyes.
24 This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.
25 Save us, we beseech you, O Lord!
O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!
26 Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.
We bless you from the house of the Lord.
27 The Lord is God,
and he has given us light.
Bind the festal procession with branches,
up to the horns of the altar.
28 You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;
you are my God; I will extol you.
29 O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.

- **John 12:12–16**

12 The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. 13 So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, shouting,
“Hosanna!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—
the King of Israel!”
14 Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, as it is written:
15 “Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion.
Look, your king is coming,
sitting on a donkey’s colt!”

16 His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.

HYMN 244 Trotting, trotting through Jerusalem

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VnSooqwkpAk&t=16s>

SERMON

It is interesting to look back at where we were on Palm Sunday a few years ago. One year we were in lockdown and another we were dealing with the fallout from the summer bushfires and praying for rain.

This means that what was once front and centre in our thinking eventually becomes little more than a distant memory. This year we have all the mess and disruption of the civil works out the front. I wonder what our memories of this will be in 12 months' time?

In recent weeks I have noticed that there have been a number of items in the news covering domestic abuse with partners and children committing violent assaults against another family member, including murder. Just a few years ago these matters did not attract much attention. Over time our interest is drawn to different situations by the media. At the same time what was once headline news can soon become completely ignored by society.

Who can remember the old saying that says: 'today's rooster soon becomes tomorrow's feather duster?' In a rating driven media world our concentration on issues is soon lost in the fog of that latest 'breaking news.'

As a matter of interest who can recall what the news headlines were last Sunday? (Queensland Labor's poor showing in the Brisbane local government election and two by-elections!)

Palm Sunday is the culmination of our Lenten Journey as we pause ready to face the full impact of Holy Week. Palm Sunday is marked by our recalling the triumphant entry of Christ into Jerusalem sitting on a donkey. For those who lined His route, Jesus was very popular. We are told that the people celebrated his arrival by making His journey like that of a king or conquering emperor. This was at a time when the whole city would have been packed out with pilgrims from across the known world.

Public perceptions can soon change. Just look at all the hype which surrounded a couple of NRL teams playing in the USA the other week. All we got out of that was one player racially sledging another.

Two thousand years ago Jesus entered Jerusalem as the leader of the latest group to bring hope to the suffering Hebrew community. There had been a growing air of excitement around this charismatic Rabbi as He wandered through the countryside heading for Jerusalem. Now that the procession had reached its pinnacle the crowds were looking forward to seeing what would happen to rescue them from oppression. I think that Jesus was probably the only one to recognise what actually lay ahead.

The celebration of the Passover Festival was a very popular time for visitors to Jerusalem. Pilgrims from across the world would congregate there. Biblical Scholar William Barclay estimated that about 14,000 lambs would have been slaughtered at this time.

There was always some undercurrent of excitement as many Jews believed that the messiah would appear during a Passover Festival. There would have been a mood of expectation as to whether the Messiah would come this year.

If we look back at the Biblical sources, there are no references to Jesus making any claims to be the Messiah. In fact He deliberately squashed any ideas that His disciples floated on this topic. However the obvious size of the following that Jesus had developed was being noted by His opponents. Both the Pharisees and the Sadducees were concerned at the impact that His message could have had on their position in society.

By the time that Jesus was ambling down the road on the back of a donkey there seemed to have been no shortage of people wanting to join with the crowd which was building around Him. Palms were waving, and along with cloaks being thrown on the road. His path was protected from the filth which would have laid in the street. Jesus procession was not being hindered by the mud and dust and dirty water which would have laid along most streets in a town which had no sewerage system.

Unlike the other nameless visitors Jesus was being welcomed with singing and dancing. This was punctuated with shouts of Hosannah! The dynamic of such a crowd soon drew other people to join in the celebrations.

Ask any defeated politician and you will soon understand that popularity can be very fleeting. Just four days after that procession there were very noisy crowds shouting, 'Crucify Him!'

How can things change so quickly?

How come that popular man on a donkey was now being whipped and beaten by the authorities?

Like any momentous event there have been any number of theologians, historians and Biblical scholars who have put forward theories about what happened in the days following that triumphal entry into Jerusalem. What is generally accepted is that everyone who called out "Hosanna" had their own ideas on what this person should do now. They wanted a leader to defeat the oppressive Roman domination of their city and lifestyle.

We just have to think back a few years to the turmoil which surrounded the replacing of President Trump to see how crowds can easily get out of control when stirred up by agitators among them.

What this tells me is that even in the most sedate situations a mob mentality can soon disrupt every-day life and safety. The causes might be insignificant but where there is some underlying frustration chaos can develop. If we are honest in our reflections on the events of the Easter prelude we might not need to write some extended thesis on mob behaviour in the First Century.

How often has our loving and caring side given way to hatred and revenge. One day we are happily singing loving praises and the next we switch. We might end up walking on the other side of the road to avoid someone who should be our friend.

I can feel full of God's love one day then almost suddenly change to passing horrible judgement on someone who upsets me. It can be so hard to live out the grace which Christ demonstrated for us.

One week we can happily sing a loving hymn like 'Brother, sister, let me serve you...' Then, without thinking, we want to control and manipulate

another person for our own ends. I might even think they were born to serve me!

I know that I am no different from a lot of people as it is so easy to wave and cheer with the crowds but it can seem like hard work to follow Jesus' guidance for us when we have to do more than just stand with the cheering crowds.

When everyone else is enjoying the atmosphere of cheering and waving palm branches it is so easy to join in praise songs. It is all so comfortable to be safe and happy in a nice church building. But, as the week ahead will remind us yet again, there is so much more to genuinely following Jesus as we need to do more than just stand on the side-lines waving.

At another time it might seem to be comfortable to sing something like 'I want you more than silver or gold...'

However:

- Do we carry this praise back into our everyday life?
- Do we really keep this approach from Monday to the next Saturday?
- Do our actions show this side of us or do we just slip easily back into our old ways?

We need to reflect how we act when we mix with a group of worldly and successful people who normally reject the idea of sharing God's love and grace in their everyday life. Can we really stand our ground and confront their bigotry and self-centeredness?

In reality do we privately praise Christ and still publicly crucify Him with our public silence?

How can we see people cheering and singing Hosanna one day then just a few days later we see the same people baying for public blood letting?

Are we any different?

This is the message that hangs over the Easter event.

- We are again challenged to look at the one who knelt and washed his disciples' feet.

Jesus is the one who shared about peace and grace.

Are we uplifted by the sacrament that he instituted on that fateful Thursday evening?

Are we given hope in the Easter Sunday resurrection?

Where do we stand?

Are we beside the road cheering and then jeering, or do we humbly follow in his footsteps?

HYMN 231 At the name of Jesus

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7w-tDjlpqk>

PRAYERS FOR THE OFFERING

Let us bring our gifts to God with a spirit of gratitude. Our offering will now be received.

O God, we bring you our gifts with joy and thanksgiving.

Guide us as we steward them in your name

so that others may be touched in some way by your love.

This we pray in faith, amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

As we enter this most holy of weeks in our journey of faith, we bring the prayers of our hearts to God. As we keep in mind the journey of Jesus in this final week towards his death, we will continue to pray too, from our Uniting Presbytery Prayer Diary. Today we are asked to pray for the Hunter Community Alliance, that we will be encouraged in mission, and also grow in understanding and relationships across the Hunter area. (And by the way, there is to be a Founding Assembly to be held at the University of Newcastle on 10th April, to which we are invited.) We will pray too for our community of faith here at Caves Beach. Let us pray:

O God whose Son came into Jerusalem when crowds cheered him and yet others did not welcome him, we pray for the world today where also people have differing views and opinions. We pray for all who make decisions affecting the lives of others: those who have power over nations,

particularly those presently at war, those who make laws that affect our justice systems and governance, and for all of us who, in our every day lives, enjoy freedom of choice as to how we relate to others. We pray that we will follow in the steps of Jesus and bring peace into this world in every way available to us.

God of peace, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

O God whose Son came into Jerusalem bringing peace in his heart, while the chief priests at the same time were plotting his death, we pray for your church across the world today which is often conflicted and divided. We pray for leaders of all Christian denominations that they may be freed from structures that hinder your message of love. We give thanks for the opportunities we have to work together with one voice, both ecumenically, and with others across the community involved with the Hunter Community Alliance. We pray for the Founding Assembly next month, that the common good of people in the Hunter region will be advanced so that fair, just and sustainable outcomes are achieved. May we live generously so that "loving God and loving neighbour" is a strong witness to all; may all our endeavours here at Caves Beach be grounded in the way of Christ Jesus.

God of peace, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

O God whose Son came into Jerusalem bringing love in his heart, and yet found that soon even his closest friends would betray and desert him, we pray for our own families, our friends and for those with whom we rub shoulders day by day. We pray for those we have differences with, that we might be willing to be open and even changed in our outlook. We pray for those who have been hurt in family relationships that have soured, for any who have been betrayed, especially women and children who have been caught up in domestic violence. We pray for those who live in fear and despair. O God, may each of us here this morning want to walk with you the costly road of genuine discipleship.

God of peace, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

O God whose Son came into Jerusalem and brought healing to the sick and release to the captive, and yet soon it was He who was to be beaten, imprisoned and violently killed. We pray today for prisoners of conscience,

and those held without trial. We pray for the release of hostages held by Hamas, along with prisoners held by Israel, that peace may be achieved. We pray for our first nations people here in Australia that are incarnated at such high rates, especially the young ones, praying that our justice system may be fair and compassionate. We pray for journalists and others whose work brings them into frightening places that truth may be told. We pray for Amnesty International, for Doctors without Borders, for United Nations Peace-keepers, and all who put their own lives at risk that others might live. May we too, however inconvenient it might be, not turn away from those who need us.

God of peace, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

O God your Son travelled towards the cross at Jerusalem, but Jerusalem was also the place of the empty tomb. We thank you that you do not leave us at a place of suffering, but bring us through to hope and joy. We pray today for those we know personally who are at present unwell, sad, feeling lonely or are in any other kind of trouble or distress, and need your help particularly. We pray for those connected to our community of faith here: for Jack & Myra, for Keith, Marie and Robert, for Pam, for Pat, and for Val, and also for Alison as she settles now in Sydney. We'll take a time of silence now for you to bring to mind those you know personally at this time..... We give you thanks, Lord God, that you are the One who brings hope and comfort to all, and that in Jesus we are indeed a new creation.

God of love and hope, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

O God, we bring these our prayers to you in the wonderful name of Jesus, singing now together the prayer He taught us:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial

and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours
now and forever. Amen.

HYMN 210 O for a thousand tongues to sing

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CFJvBwgmK_c

BENEDICTION

As we approach Easter,
know that even in your darkest places,
Jesus is already there.

Jesus enters into our lives –
the good, the bad, the ugly –
with delivering love.

Every millimetre of Jesus' journey
traces the depth and breadth of God's love for all of us.

And here, in the shadow of the cross,
Jesus continues to enter in,
bringing good from even the worst things,
life even from death.

Go with courage. Go with hope.

God is with you.

Jesus goes before you.

AMEN

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=liH_HdkWs74