

## Sermon for Palm Sunday 29 March 2026 at 9h00 at Holy Trinity Geneva

*Texts: Isaiah 50.4-9a; Philippians 2.5-11; Mathew 21.1-11*

### **Palm Sunday**

One of the most poignant stories in Roman mythology which the poet Ovid records in his work *'Metamorphosis*, is that of the young man Narcissus. He is cursed by the goddess Nemesis after rejecting the affections of the young nymph Echo, to fall in love with his own reflection. Narcissus gazes at it in a pool of water, and because he is never able to possess it, pines away, and in the legend, turns into the narcissus flower.

What has this to do with Palm Sunday? Because tragically not only do we, as human beings fall in love with our own image, but we also are tempted to believe that God too is made in our image. This leads us to project onto God, ambitions and desires, often linked to our self-aggrandisement which we believe will bring us satisfaction and control over our lives.

But on Palm Sunday we are jolted out of this fiction in a paradoxical way. God does indeed come to us but in a way that we do not expect and which startles us out of our certainties. Through the events of Jesus' Passion and crucifixion which follow in Holy Week, God will reveal to us the depths of His love for us and the truth that we are made in *His* image not Him in ours and the implications of this.

Palm Sunday is the start of this journey in which we will encounter the depths of God's love for us as revealed to us in Christ. But this is the day too when we are called to embark on a journey of honest and probably painful self-examination. Are we a Narcissus or a Christian? Are we worshipping a god whom we have made in our own image arising from our self-love? Or are we worshipping God in whose image we are made?

The crowds who welcomed Jesus so enthusiastically as he entered Jerusalem mounted on a donkey certainly hoped Jesus would be their triumphant king. As their lives were often short, precarious and often brutal under Roman occupation, their hope was for a military-style Messiah who would vindicate them against their enemies and bring to them the power and status for which they longed. That is why they greeted Jesus with such excitement, with palm branches as their Messiah and King. In just the same way, the great Jewish military leader, Judas Maccabeus had been welcomed in Jerusalem after his victory over Israel's enemies nearly two hundred years earlier.

And in a way, the crowd were right. Jesus was coming to them as King and Messiah fulfilling the words of the prophet Zechariah (9.9):

*" Look your king is coming to you,  
humble and mounted on a donkey,  
And on a colt, the foal of a donkey',*

But Jesus was coming to Jerusalem not to seize power as King and Messiah but to do something very different indeed. That was to offer his own life to bring redemption not just for Israel, but for all people. And in the shock of this revelation as event unfold during the final days of Jesus' life, the crowd will turn on Jesus. They will no longer praise him as Messiah and king, but will instead bay in anger and contempt for his blood.

How can such affirmation and praise turn so quickly to hate and a desire to kill? I believe it is because so often, we are so focused with ourselves that we project ourselves onto God and seek to worship a god whom we've made in our own image to meet our agendas and desires. In so doing, we blind ourselves to the very nature of God and his love not just for us but for all creation. We also deafen our ears to his call to us to make his transformational love visible in the world.

And this is the context in which St Paul was writing his letter to the Philippians. For this very newly established and fragile Christian community looked in danger of being torn apart by their quarrels and their desire to pursue their individual ambitions to seek power, influence and prestige. In the process they risked losing sight of God.

This is why, in his letter to them, and above all in powerful and moving extract from this letter which we've heard today, St Paul reveals to them the depths of God's love. He shows them how Christ, though always pre-existent with God the Father, consciously and willingly relinquished his divine power to become human. There is the extraordinary image here of Christ emptying himself to become human with all that being human entails – suffering cold, hunger, fear, loneliness, and above all, being vulnerable.

And, as St Paul shows us, what characterised Jesus' earthly life was his total obedience to God his Father coupled with humility and deep compassion for humanity. Jesus' decision to become human for our sakes and to follow that right through to death on the Cross for us, helps us to glimpse right at the very core of our being, the extent to which God loves us and longs for each one of us.

Today on Palm Sunday, we hold up our palms to be blessed, reminding us that Jesus has entered Jerusalem as King., Together with the crowd we acknowledge him as the Messiah. As Holy Week begins tomorrow, we are called, as Christians, as his followers, to journey with Jesus through the events of his Passion to wait and witness at the foot of the Good Cross on Good Friday.

As we journey with Jesus in the forthcoming days, we are also called to reflect on our own lives and motivations in the light of what Jesus is doing for us. To ask ourselves some hard questions and to pray for grace that we may hold fast to Jesus as we seek to answer them truthfully.

And the questions are these. If I look at my life now, am I worshipping a god whom I want to fix things for me. A god, like for Narcissus, made in our image whom we hope to cajole, persuade or even manipulate to sort out our lives so that they may be comfy, undisturbed, safe and as far as possible, sealed off from the needs of others?

Or am I following or do I desire to follow the living God, whose face of love is revealed to us in Christ? The God who for our sakes, emptied himself of all but love, and in his human life, death and resurrection, has shown us what it means to be truly human, made in God's image? The God who calls us to lay aside the carapace of our self-sufficiency and instead be utterly vulnerable, open to His call, wherever it may lead us. The God who calls us to remember that he longs for us to have hearts of flesh not stone so we may weep with those who suffer and strive to help them.

This week we have seen some of the ugliest sides of human nature exposed in the naked power battle currently being fought in the Middle East. But we have also seen some of the finest, not least in our new Archbishop of Canterbury, for whom her nurse' clasp now used on her Archbishop's cope, is a powerful reminder to her and to us that we are created to love and serve God in whose image we are made and to love others as ourselves.

As we approach the start of Holy Week, may God give us grace to follow Christ faithfully in his Passion through which he will reveal to us the depths of God's love for us in whose image we are made.

**Amen**

**Canon Daphne Green**