

The importance of the triumphal entry is reflected, in a sense, by the fact that it is one of a very small and select group of events, in Christ's life, that are recorded in all four gospels.

Matthew recounts how Jesus and the disciples pause at Bethphage, within a mile of Jerusalem - Bethphage literally means 'House of unripe figs' – and, as such, is a reflection on the fruitlessness of the alleged religious authorities within the city walls. Whilst there, Christ instructs his disciples in regard to the donkey and colt fulfilling the prophecy described in the book of Zechariah. It is something of an understatement to say that prophecies such as these are hugely important, principally because they underline the inevitability of God's plan. Psalm 22, written a thousand years before the crucifixion, begins with some of Christ's final words - 'My God, My God why have you forsaken me', and goes on to detail, with meticulous accuracy, the 'piercing of hands and feet' and even the 'casting of lots for my garment'. I regularly tell myself and my children that the anticipation of a forthcoming challenge is almost always far worse than the event itself; but this is not the case for our Lord. In spite of this brief period of adoration, described in our gospel, Jesus knows, as he has done throughout his earthly life, exactly what lies before him; and pointedly, in Luke's version of these events, Christ he as they approach the city.

He enters Jerusalem, to shouts of Hosanna literally meaning 'Save us' and palm branches are laid on the road before him. Palms are powerful symbols that had been used since ancient Greek times to honour triumph in both sport and war. This is based on the tree's longevity with some species reaching 500 years of age; The symbol of the palm appears throughout the bible, with the book of Kings describing Solomon's temple as '...adorned with carvings of palm trees overlaid with gold.'

We are told that, on Christ's arrival, the whole of Jerusalem was stirred, with some translations describing it as uproar. What a sad indictment of how fickle mankind can be - I wonder how many people in that cheering crowd who welcomed our Lord were, within a week, screaming at Pontius Pilate to crucify him.

But just briefly Jesus is recognised by some as the king he is – and this concept of recognition is I think absolutely crucial - there are a number of other seminal moments in the gospels when Christ is seen but not recognised; in particular the road to Emmaus where Cleopas and a companion, one of Christ's close followers, engage and walk with him for some time; but it is only at supper, when Jesus breaks bread, that they recognise him. Similarly in John chapter 20, Mary Magdalene is weeping at the empty tomb; Christ is standing there, yet she mistakes him for the gardener, and asks if it is he who has removed the body - only when he calls her by name does she see him for who he is; finally, in John chapter 21, Peter, Thomas, Nathanael and other disciples are fishing without success – something that as a fly fisherman myself, I can readily sympathise with - Christ instructs them to cast their nets the other way, resulting in a catch so large that it cannot be hauled

into the boat, and only then does Peter recognise him.

Each of these examples involve people who loved Jesus and knew him well, who served him, who witnessed his ministry and whom he, of course, loved back - but none of them initially recognise the risen Christ, the Christ who, in the greatest triumph of all, has conquered death – he has to spend time with them, call their name, provide for them, before they see him for who he and what he has done – and I think that can be exactly the same for us. He loves us unconditionally, calls each one of us by name, blesses us with all we need and promises us an eternity in his presence – but how often do we fail to recognise this?

Christ opening the gates to Jerusalem is the beginning of the final act that results in him opening the gates to eternal life - as our psalm says 'he has not given me over to death. Open for me the gates of the righteous, I will enter and give thanks to the Lord.'

I don't know many of you have seen the 2004 Mel Gibson film the Passion of the Christ. It is not an easy film to watch and caused considerable controversy on its release with its unflinchingly graphic depictions of Christ's suffering. For me it is a powerful reminder that, we can, maybe, get a bit too used to saying the familiar words 'He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and buried,' without really considering the prolonged agony that Christ went through on our account.

To acknowledge and recognise the extraordinary scale of that suffering, is also to acknowledge and recognise the extraordinary scale of his love for us – I wonder if we should actually say 'God so loves the world – present tense - that he gave his only son.' Although it would take some faculty to get that changed.

In a sense therefore, we are all on our own road to Jerusalem. Do we recognise the risen Christ and have the courage to follow him, do we recognise him in the midst of hardship, in spite of our fears for what tomorrow holds, for what people might think of us; in an age when technology seems to rule every aspect of our lives and claims to have all the answers, do we dare to give a different one? Do we have the faith to rely, as verse 22 of our psalm explains, on the stone that the builder's rejected, as our cornerstone?

I would like to leave you with an image from Revelation chapter 7, that illustrates what awaits us if we recognise Christ as the king he is and continue to lay our palms at his feet, '... I looked...a great multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language...standing before the throne and before the Lamb, they were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.'

**Michael Grist, 29 March 2026**