

A sermon preached on Palm Sunday, March 29, 2026.
 at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT by The Rt. Rev. Gordon P. Scruton
 Isaiah 50:4-9a. Psalm 31:9-16. Philippians 2:5-11. Matthew 26:14-27:66

Have you noticed that life does not always turn out the way you think it will?

When I went to college, I never in my wildest dreams expected I would become an Episcopalian and I was very clear that I was never going to be ordained.

When Sarah Mallally was Installed as the new Archbishop of Canterbury this past week, she said in her sermon, she could have never imagined as a teenager who intentionally chose to become a follower of Jesus, that she would one day become the Archbishop of Canterbury.

What are the things in your life that have turned out differently than you expected?

Life teaches us that we can't ever fully imagine what will become the unfolding mystery of our lives. Things we thought were clear suddenly change and something very unexpected emerges. This is what happened in both the Palm Sunday Gospel and the Passion Gospel.

The Palm Sunday crowd was excited to walk alongside Jesus, waving palm branches and singing Psalms of praise to God. The Psalm they sang as they walked was the familiar Psalm 118 which they normally sang as they walked to the Temple in Jerusalem on Passover. And since it was Passover time, this is the song they sang as they walked with Jesus. "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven." This was a Psalm crying out for God's help. Hosanna is not just a word of praise, like the word Alleluia. Hosanna is the combination of two Aramaic words that meant "Save us".

This cry of "hosanna, save us/help us", expressed the longing hopes of that first Palm Sunday crowd who felt beaten down constantly by the occupation of the Roman Army and government. They felt like foreigners in their own country and felt helpless to improve their daily lives because of the powerful control of the Roman Empire. So, their cry of Hosanna was both their traditional liturgical song and also the wail of their hearts...O God save us from the nightmare of our country and our lives! They longed for God to change their situation.

I wonder, what are the longing cries of your heart this morning? All of us carry our own struggles and our concerns about loved ones, about our nation and world. Think of how many people around the world are longing for things where they live to become better, more peaceful, safe and just, with more food and better health care. We are invited to join the Palm Sunday crowd and bring the longing cries of our hearts and of the world to Jesus this morning.

For that first Palm Sunday crowd, something was dramatically different from their past Passover walks into the Jerusalem Temple. What was different was they were walking with Jesus. That year, many in their parade were beginning to think that Jesus might be God's Messiah, the one God promised to send to bring freedom from Rome. As they cried out "Hosanna, Save us", they were crying out to God and crying out to Jesus with a deep longing and hope: now is the time, Jesus. Come save us from the oppression of the Romans.

Sometimes we forget that the first Palm Sunday parade was a risky walk, with political implications for the marchers. The Romans could have arrested them for disturbing the peace and campaigning for Jesus, not Caesar, to be their Ruler. Those walkers took a risk to publicly proclaim their

hope that God would work through Jesus to be their spiritual and political Savior. While they were enthusiastic, that rag tag Palm Sunday procession was probably not very large, otherwise the Romans would have arrested them.

By contrast, this and every Passover, Pilate, the Roman Governor would march into Jerusalem, riding on a huge war horse, in full military regalia, surrounded by a legion of 3,000 Roman soldiers wearing red and gold armor, marching in lock step as they entered the city gates. It was a military parade designed to intimidate the local population.

And this Passover, Jesus rode into Jerusalem from the opposite side of the city, sitting on a small donkey, surrounded by a small and joyful palm-waving crowd of ordinary people. Do you see the pictures in your imagination? Roman soldiers with swords and spears vs. ordinary folks joyfully singing Psalms and waving palm branches. Roman power and arrogance vs. Jesus' ordinariness and humility.

That palm-waving crowd dared to believe that Jesus might possibly be the Messiah God promised to send. They pictured Jesus defeating the powerful Romans, taking control and making Israel great again, ruling not only over Israel, but over the whole world as God's Messiah. Israel would once again become a rich and powerful world empire, like when David and Solomon were their kings.

These hopes and dreams of the Palm Sunday crowd were crushed just five days later on Friday, as Jesus was nailed to the cross. They expected victory. What they experienced at the cross felt like defeat. Instead of Jesus defeating the Romans, the Romans had crucified Jesus. Life did not turn out as they expected. Their high hopes on Palm Sunday turned into the lowest, most disillusioning point of their lives. They felt despair. All their hopes were as dead as Jesus. And yet, by Sunday, they would begin to discover that on the other side of the dead end of the cross and tomb, Jesus had risen and a whole new life for him, for them, for the whole world was emerging.

You see, the crowd misunderstood Palm Sunday. It was not the high point of political and military success they imagined. And the crowd misunderstood Good Friday. It was not the hopeless dead end they imagined. Both gospels remind us that often we do not see life as God sees it. From our human perspective God has a way of taking what we think is success and revealing its emptiness. And God takes what looks like failure and turns it into a redemptive pathway to new life.

What do you think God wants to teach you and me this morning through the Palm Sunday crowd and the Good Friday crowd?

Perhaps God wants to humbly remind us that we do not really understand the mystery of how God works in our lives and in this world as clearly as we think we do. Perhaps we also need to learn again that the all-powerful love of God comes to us in both the highs and the lows of our lives. We may have a grand picture of God's greatness, yet we often are blind to the God who comes to us in the little things and big things of our daily lives, including in our greatest joys and failures, even in our darkest Good Friday times.

The Palm waving crowd might ask us this morning: What causes you the greatest joy in your life right now? What gives you a sense of security and hope? It is good to offer our thanks and praise to God for all the blessings of our lives. Thanksgiving is always appropriate. At the same time the Palm waving crowd reminds us that we never know how long our greatest joys and securities will last, from a human perspective. All of us, like the Palm waving crowd, are vulnerable to life's surprise changes.

The Good Friday crowd might ask us this morning: What are the worst fears, the most devastating possibilities that haunt your life right now, just as Christ's crucifixion devastated them on Good Friday? They might remind us that our worst fears are never the end of the story. The Good Friday crowd learned that, over time, God can work in mysterious and powerful ways to overcome the worst that evil, sin and death can do in our lives and in the world around us. What appears to our human eyes and understanding to be a hopeless dead-end situation may actually be a time of transition, a time of God's new beginnings on the other side of the death.

The Palm Sunday and the Good Friday crowds might ask us to look at Jesus during both those events. In both situations, look at his humility, look at his trust in God in the midst of situations beyond his control; one that seemed amazingly positive and one that was overwhelmingly devastating. They might ask us to notice how Jesus found hope in his most devastating moments by talking with His Heavenly Father about his feelings and struggles. Remember how the night before, he talked about his fears to his Father, struggling and praying, "I'd like to get out of this, yet not my will, but your will be done." As he was dying on the cross, He cried out, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" And he kept thinking of the needs of people around him, "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they are doing." Jesus taught us how to live in the best and the worst situations: by talking with God very honestly, in the middle of everything, trusting God to guide and sustain us.

Let me ask again, what do you think God is saying to you through the stories of the Palm Sunday and Good Friday crowds? I invite you to close your eyes and in the silence of our hearts let us talk with Jesus.

How might Jesus be inviting you and me to change our attitudes and perspectives, our words and actions this week...as a result of what we have learned from the Palm Sunday and Good Friday crowds and from Jesus in both those situations?...

Day by day, Dear Lord, three things we pray:
To see you more clearly,
Love you more dearly,
Follow you more nearly,
Day by day. AMEN. (Richard of Chichester)