

March 29, 2026

Palm Sunday

Texts: Philippians 2:5-11; John 12:12-19

In the prayer that our Lord Jesus gave us to pray every day, we pray that our Father's kingdom would come and that His will would be done. As we know from our Catechism, and from the Bible, these things take place anyway, even without our prayers. Why do we pray for them, then? We pray for them so that we would recognize them happening, find comfort in them, and seek to reflect them in our own lives.

We don't always see God at work, or recognize what He is doing. The things of God aren't always what they seem. But as we pray and hear His Word, when we do realize what's doing on, we are given great comfort and joy as our God's kingdom comes and His will is done.

Palm Sunday – Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem – is one such example where things aren't necessarily what they seem. To the human eye and ear, what does the whole event seem like? It seems like exaltation, like a moment of glory for Jesus, right? People waving branches, hailing Jesus as the Son of David, calling out to Him with "Hosanna" – a cry for Him to save them.

It seems like Jesus is finally there to bring in His kingdom, restore Jerusalem, and make everything right again. The crowds are shouting it, the disciples are proclaiming it, even those who hate Jesus are thinking it. The Pharisees, with fear and resentment, say among themselves, "You see that you are accomplishing nothing. Look, the world has gone after Him!" They're thinking that this is Jesus' moment of triumph, and if they don't stop Him now, He'll take their positions, their authority, their glory, all for Himself.

The irony here is that, contrary to what everyone seems to think, this isn't actually a moment of triumph or glory for Jesus. It's actually part of His humiliation, not His exaltation. St. Paul helps us to remember this with our Epistle reading from Philippians 2. He reminds us that Jesus is in "the form of God," that Jesus is the eternal Son of God, fully God Himself, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit. For eternity past He dwelt in glory beyond description. Prior to coming to earth as a man, He heard the songs of angels and received the praises of the souls of the faithful departed. He walked the halls of heaven, a place so beautiful that even our imaginations fail to fully picture it.

Jerusalem, a dusty city of the ancient near east, doesn't quite compare. Nor does a borrowed donkey really match the splendor of riding on the very wings of the wind, as the Psalms declare of the Lord.

No, Jesus is coming into Jerusalem because He's set all that glory aside. As we heard, Jesus "emptied Himself, by taking on the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men." The Son of God was born to a poor carpenter and his wife in a stable, then grew up likely working as a carpenter Himself for many years until beginning His ministry. Once that ministry had begun, Jesus proclaimed the arrival of the Kingdom of God, and He worked various signs and miracles to prove it.

But even with the miracles, many people still doubted. This kingdom seemed a lot less glorious than people had imagined. And Jesus Himself, as the Scriptures say, wasn't anything remarkable to look at. How could the Son of God and King of Kings appear as just some guy from Nazareth?

The people hailing Him and waving palm branches probably think they're giving a great welcome, and from an earthly perspective they probably are, but if they knew who it was who was entering into their city, they'd realize that the reception didn't quite fit the occasion. God is in their midst, but they don't see it. They don't know it.

That idea of knowing – or not knowing – shows us yet another place where the things of God aren't always as they seem to appear. Jesus is entering almost like a king or celebrity would, being carried along with praise and adoration. But what do we hear in Philippians? “And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient.” The triumphal entry is a display of obedience! I'm guessing that might not be the first thought that comes to your mind when you picture Jesus riding into Jerusalem; I know it wasn't mine.

And yet it certainly was an act of obedience. As true God, the Son doesn't need to “obey” the Father, because as God they share the same will, the same perfect desires. But when the Son becomes human, He takes on a human will. This is what becomes obedient.

As God, Jesus knew what was happening on Palm Sunday. He knew that the Pharisees were plotting to kill Him. He knew the crowds would be calling for His crucifixion. He knew that His disciples would abandon and forsake Him. Jesus knows that He is entering into Jerusalem so that He may be driven out. As God, He knows all this.

And as a man, He doesn't desire it. This doesn't mean that He is doubting, or wanting to rebel against the divine plan of salvation. Not at all! Jesus desires to save humanity. But at the same time, as a man, He isn't looking forward to suffering and dying. Think of His prayer in Gethsemane: “Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me.” His human will would prefer to save mankind in a less painful way. But then how does Jesus conclude His prayer? “Nevertheless, not My will, but Yours, be done.” Jesus, the Lord of all, humbles Himself and becomes obedient.

What is it that leads Jesus to humble Himself and become obedient? That's another thing that isn't readily apparent that first Palm Sunday. Jesus is riding into Jerusalem out of love. When we see something like that event, a parade of sorts, love probably isn't what we think of.

Those marching in a homecoming parade aren't obvious examples of love. When the Super Bowl champions have a parade in their home city, it's not an act of love on their part. Maybe some of their most devoted fans might claim to “love” them, but for those in the parade, it's about receiving recognition, praise, adoration. It's about being honored by others.

That's not why Jesus is riding into Jerusalem. He's not on the donkey to let everyone publicly declare how wonderful they think He is. He's not there to bask in the praise of adoring fans. Again, Jesus knows that most of these people will have either vanished or turned against Him by Friday.

No, Jesus is there because He loves them. He had watched Jerusalem and its people for centuries, gladly observing their days of faithfulness, looking on them with sadness when they strayed,

sorrowing over them when He was forced to destroy the city in order to halt its wickedness. In fact, Jesus weeps over Jerusalem shortly before He enters into it, lamenting its hardness of heart and coming destruction.

Out of love, Jesus has mourned over man's sin and destruction ever since Eve took the first bite of the forbidden fruit. He doesn't enjoy watching those He loves suffer the wages of sin.

And so in love, Jesus comes to bear that burden Himself. He loves man and becomes man so that He might fulfill the Law required of man. He becomes obedient "to the point of death, even death on a cross," so that He can do one of the few things God normally can't do: die. Hanging on the cross, Jesus will be the greatest and most perfect illustration of His own words: "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends."

He comes to lay down His life for His disciples who will be abandoning Him. He comes to lay down His life for the crowds who will be calling for His death. He comes to lay down His life even for those Pharisees who are plotting to have Him murdered. All of them. You and me and every other person who will ever live.

Jesus loves even those who do not return His love. He dies even for those who will take Him for granted and pursue the world's paths to destruction. Though they can't see it, those who are plotting Jesus' death as they watch Him ride into the city are seeing His love, even for them.

Having humbled Himself and become obedient, and even laying down His life out of love, our Lord was then exalted by His Father. He was exalted and raised from the dead. He was exalted and restored again to the full power and authority He possessed from eternity. And the day is coming when He will be exalted as He returns in glory.

On that day, those words from Philippians will be fulfilled. Those in heaven will bow in joy and worship as they behold the completion of all things. Those on earth will bow, either as believers bowing in awe or as unbelievers bowing in terror. And those under the earth, even Satan himself, will be forced to bow, despite hating every moment of it. That will be the day when the Church's prayers will become reality, when His kingdom will come in its fullness and His will will be done in its entirety.

None of that was apparent when Jesus rode into Jerusalem two thousand years ago. For some of it, we are still waiting for the day when it becomes visible. Yet our Lord has declared that it will happen, just as He foretold all His passion, death, and resurrection to His disciples. While we wait, we follow our Savior in His example of humility and obedience. We trust Him now in the things which we cannot see, and we look forward to the day when we will bow our knees and wave our palm branches as we behold Him face to face.

In the name of Jesus, amen.