



The Church of England
in Essex and East London

Diocese of Chelmsford

What sort of King?

29th March 2026

Readings: Zechariah 9:9-12; Matthew 21:1-11

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Good morning. It's good to be with you today as we celebrate on this Palm Sunday.

The Royal family are never far from the media spotlight. There are the positive stories, such as the King's visit to Dedham in our Diocese a few weeks ago. Then there are the negative stories, not least the controversies surrounding the King's brother Andrew which have been running it seems for decades. It was not that long ago that people were speculating as to what sort of King Charles would be when he succeeded his mother Queen Elizabeth and over the last couple of years we have begun to find out as we listen to what he says and watch what he does.

Today, as I said, we celebrate Palm Sunday, the day when we remember the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. Jesus is given a royal welcome. He's greeted as the descendant of King David, and he's heralded as the one ushering in the kingdom of God. It's one of those pivotal events in the life of Jesus, recorded in all four gospels. And though some of the details may be different in each of the gospels, there's little doubt about its significance. So what does it signify and what does it tell us about the king being welcomed and the nature of his kingship?

In order to understand the events on that first Palm Sunday, we need to understand the symbolism of the event. We're all familiar with the signs and symbols that we see around us each day. For example, when we're driving or walking on the roads, we see certain signs and we know what they mean. Of course, some of those signs are a bit more obscure than others. We don't see them as often, and to help us to understand them, to interpret them, we might need some help. We might look, for example, to the Highway Code, a book to explain the signs and symbols on our roads. In the same way, we sometimes need help to understand the signs and symbols we encounter in the life of Jesus and Palm Sunday is a good example of this. Jesus travels to Jerusalem and he's welcomed with various symbolic acts. To the people of his day, these would have been obvious, but not so obvious for us and to understand what's going on, we need to go back to the Old Testament and the prophecies about the Messiah, the king promised by God to the people of Israel. If you like, it's our highway code to help us understand the symbols of that triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The key prophecy for Palm Sunday is a reading from Zechariah, Zechariah 9, verses 9 to 12. This is what it says, and I'm going to be using the message translation just because I think it captures something of what the prophet is saying in quite a profound way. Zechariah declares (9):

Shout and cheer, Daughter Zion!

Raise your voice, Daughter Jerusalem!

Your king is coming!

a good king who makes all things right,

a humble king riding a donkey,

a mere colt of a donkey.

The very act of riding into Jerusalem on this day, in this way, on a colt that hasn't been ridden before, was a sign that Jesus was claiming to fulfil this promise of a king. The people would have been familiar with these scriptures. They would have been familiar with the promise, and now they would see that promise is being fulfilled. Jesus is the king who was promised and longed for. But what is the nature of his kingship? What sort of king is Jesus declaring himself to be?

Traditionally, kings and their representatives rode warhorses. Pilate, Caesar's representative, travelling down from his residency in Caesarea Maritima and entering Jerusalem in preparation for the Passover, would ride a warhorse, and he'd be accompanied by his troops. It was a statement of authority, a statement of power, a statement of military might, a statement of dominance over the population. By contrast, the king promised to the people of Israel, the Messiah, makes a very different entrance on a colt, and a very different statement about his authority and power. Again, we go back to the prophet Zechariah to help us understand this. And Zacariah proclaims (10):

I've had it with war—no more chariots in Ephraim,
no more war horses in Jerusalem,
no more swords and spears, bows and arrows.
He will offer peace to the nations,
a peaceful rule worldwide,
from the four winds to the seven seas.

Here is a king, says Zechariah, whose promise is of peace, not war, a rule of unity rather than division, of healing rather than oppression. And not just for one nation, but for all the nations. The symbolic act, riding into Jerusalem on a colt, declares that this king will be very different from the other kings and rulers that the people will have known. He is the King of Peace. And the peace that he shall bring will be established not through victory in war, but through a very different victory. Victory won on the cross. Victory over sin and death. Victory over all that divides and destroys. Victory over all that stands in opposition to God's rule over our lives and his world. As St Paul writes in Romans chapter 5:

We were God's enemies, but he made us his friends through the death of his son. Now that we are God's friends, how much more will we be saved by Christ's life?

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, he was greeted with palm branches and cloaks strewn on the ground. This was a symbolic act used to welcome a conquering king; the sign of rejoicing, a way of honouring and praising the king. And so today we celebrate Palm Sunday, and we celebrate it with palms. And our palms are in the shape of a cross. because we remember that just a few days later, Jesus' victory would be won, not through the overthrow of Rome in battle, but through his death on a cross. This would be how Jesus' kingly reign would be established. Accompanying palms and cloaks laid down were not just symbols of praise, but words of praise.

"Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

Many of us in our worship this Palm Sunday will celebrate Holy Communion. As part of the Eucharistic Prayer we will use these words of praise spoken on that first Palm Sunday, as we remember afresh what Jesus has done for us through his death on the cross. And when we do this, we are declaring that Jesus is our Lord and King, just like those people who greeted Jesus on the road into Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday. Jesus is the King promised by the prophet. Jesus is the King who has established a kingdom of peace, reconciling us to God. And Jesus and he alone is the King who is worthy of our praise. Amen.