

# TEACHING NOTES – PALM SUNDAY

Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

Matthew 21:1-11



A week is 7 days or 168 hours, and the last week has been longer than most and not just because an extra hour was added due to the end of daylight saving; it's been *a long week in lockdown*. In such a short time our world has been turned upside-down. The streets are virtually empty, schools and shops are closed, everyone is home and travel has stopped. Given Kiwis' love of travel and that tourism is one of our biggest industries, this will have incalculable knock-on effects for the economy, including job losses and reduced cash flow. A recession is on the horizon and one analyst has estimated unemployment could be as high as 30 percent. A grim scenario indeed.

Everyone can identify with scope and scale of what's occurred, be it the macro economic and social changes, or the micro changes disrupting the predictable rhythms of life and the simple freedom to come and go as we please. It feels like a state of siege.

In less than a week Jesus went from being feted as king to being mocked and crucified. The impact of the Palm Sunday drama was likely lost on the majority of the crowd swept along with the spectacle. He rode a donkey, a humble beast of burden. A conquering king in those times would parade on a horse symbolising strength and victory in war. Riding a donkey also represents humility and is consistent with Jesus' wider life and ministry: he never drew attention to himself but sought only to reflect the Father's glory and do the works God had sent him to do. In Mark 1:41-43, for example, he healed a man with leprosy but sent him away with a stern warning not to tell. Why? Because that would hinder his message and divert attention to the miracle itself rather than Jesus' message.

Riding a donkey was counter-cultural. It was a gesture of peace not war in an age defined by military conquest (this would jar with both Jewish and Roman culture and almost appear comical). Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, riding a donkey fulfilled the prophecy of Zechariah some 500 years before (Zechariah 9:9-10), and it fitted with several Old Testament passages about the servant king who would suffer, e.g. Psalms 22, 118, and Isaiah 52-53. It also echoed Solomon riding to his coronation on a mule which belonged to David (1 Kings 1:33-44), and all David's sons rode mules (2 Samuel 13:29). Jesus's entry is a royal advent but there's no slaughter or trampling. He is heralding a coming kingdom as the Prince of *peace*. A lot would happen in the following week. The adulation would quickly fade and many in the fickle crowd who shouted 'Hosanna!' would soon chant for Barabbas just a few days later (Matthew 27:20).

An important difference between our week of upheaval and that Jesus faced is this: he knew what lay ahead – we don't. The present crisis is a fast-paced and evolving situation. We don't know the future, but in faith *we know the one who holds the future*. We need to press into

Christ and know deep down that everything is in hand in God's economy. Unlike those in the Palm Sunday crowd, we know more of the Jesus story and are called to remain faithful to the King of kings, Lord of lords, and Prince of peace. This is our sure hope and we must not be swayed by on-going reports of gloom forecast for the months ahead.

### **Questions to ponder**

1. Do you find it easy or hard to see the plans and purposes of God in the present pandemic?
2. Palm Sunday was a moment in time but one in the wider Easter story that impacted all subsequent history. We also know it was the faithfulness of God in Zechariah's prophecy being fulfilled five centuries later. Into what context might people of faith in the future place the present crisis?