

*My fellow parishioners: This Palm Sunday, we had hoped to be together, of course, but events have intruded to make that impossible. My suggestion under the circumstances is to read below my commentary on the background to the Passion story and then follow it by re-reading one of the accounts listed here from Matthew, Mark or Luke (alternately assigned for a particular lectionary year). I believe if you do this, you will be able to approach the Passion reading with a clearer focus on what is transpiring, because when we forget the political element, we do not fully grasp the significance of what we are reading or hearing on Palm Sunday. Perhaps in this way, we can all take part in this enormously meaningful day in the church year in a renewed way and build up our faith during difficult times. To read the version of scripture authorized for use in the Episcopal church, just google the reading you plan to examine (from the possibilities below from Matthew, Mark or Luke) by typing in the book, chapter and verse designation followed by the word oremus which will take you to the passage in the NRSV translation which we use for purposes of following the lectionary in our church. I wish you all a blessed Holy Week which this year will include the introduction of online worship via Zoom (explained in another memo).*

*Yours, Fr. Greg+*

PALM SUNDAY: PRELUDE TO THE PASSION

April 5, 2020

St. Alban's Church Staten Island

The Rev. J. Gregory Morgan

(Matthew 26:36-27:54 or 27:1-54; Mark 14: 32-15:39 or 15: 1-39; Luke 22:39-23:49 or 23:1-49)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Palm Sunday occurred historically at the time of the Passover in approximately the year 30 in the Common Era. The Last Supper occurred on that Thursday, the Crucifixion on Friday, The Jewish Sabbath on Saturday and the Resurrection on Sunday. This chronology comes to us directly out of the Gospel of St. Mark, the earliest of the New Testament accounts of the life of Jesus and is repeated in Luke and the other accounts with minor differences. And on Palm Sunday we recall the beginning of the Passion of Our Lord. The word passion can mean suffering as it does in the Latin noun that forms its basis; it can also mean consuming interest. In the case of Jesus, it is probably best to associate the word passion in both senses with Holy Week: clearly, Jesus suffered as he was executed, but he also was completely committed — passionately so — to the Kingdom of God which rests on justice as its essential characteristic. It can also be helpful to remind ourselves that the disciples, so frequently depicted in the New Testament as hapless, doubting, in denial, faithless, and even bone-headed — these men with all of their foibles “somehow...rose out of their stupor to become paragons of Christian virtues.....somehow that

general obtuseness and vague malaise became a wildfire of faith so fierce that some were willing to go to their death for the sake of what they'd seen." Thus, the word passion came to have particular meaning when applied to the twelve followers closest to Jesus. And if we recall that second use of the term passion, it can be helpful in focusing our attention on features of our Palm Sunday observance which have often in the past been overlooked, downplayed or only hinted at. When we leave out the essential political element in recalling the original Palm Sunday, we lose our way. In doing so, we can fail to understand both the popularity of Jesus as well as the opposition to him which led to his arrest, trial and execution. And then we lose sight of the entire significance of what was going on when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the back of a colt to the loud praise of his followers. What was really going on was this. Jesus was entering the city from the east in a peasant procession declaring the Kingdom of God with its basis in justice and demanding a fairer share of the world's wealth for all people, not just a privileged few. From the west, Pontius Pilate was entering the city as Roman governor at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers proclaiming the sovereignty of the empire and the legitimacy of a domination system based on exploitation of the many by the few; this system demanded absolute obedience to the overlords upon whom it bestowed enormous rewards, and Roman power was supplemented by the collaboration of the Jewish religious elite. So, this was a classic conflict of opposing political forces — two ideologies and two competing systems — and the stronger side from the point of view of troops and worldly power was bound to win, at least in the near term. But each side claimed to have the Son of God as its legitimate leader — Jesus of Nazareth on one side and Tiberius on the other. This is why Jesus was so adamant in saying that his fate was sealed before ever entering the city. Jesus took his cue from the Old Testament, specifically from the Book of the prophet Zechariah, chapter 9, verses 9-10. Zechariah prophesied that a king would enter Jerusalem, "humble and riding on a colt, the foal of a donkey." But this would not be the usual kind of king. This king would command peace to the nations of the world and would cut off the chariot and war-horse and battle bow of the conquering force holding Israel captive. So, this action by Jesus was very deliberate, very political, and very provocative. And it was destined to bring a prompt response. Jesus was an immediate threat to the position of the Jewish religious elite in Jerusalem, and they were collaborating in the Roman occupation of Palestine. In short, this provocation necessitated Rome's having to demonstrate in a forceful way that nothing would unseat her power and nothing would undo the domination system in which the local elite participated. All of this background information is essential in understanding what was to follow: the dramatic story of the Passion of Our Lord.