

Address from Ash Leighton Plom for Palm Sunday

The two sets of readings today can give us emotional whiplash, between the joy of the Triumphal Entry and the shock of the Passion.

This is the journey of Holy Week: a joyful week, a brutal week, and with much scope for a wide range of emotion besides.

The historian E.P. Sanders, in his book *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, reveals that, contrary to popular belief, the week leading up to Jesus' death and the days following his resurrection are among the best documented in all of ancient history.

We have more written evidence for the last week of Jesus' life before the crucifixion, and the first days afterwards, than we do for any other week in any other person's life in all of antiquity.

I opened up my copy of Sanders' *Historical Figure of Jesus* again just recently in the course of some student ministry. A student friend of mine introduced me – electronically – to one of her housemates who she's been introducing to Christianity.

He wanted to know if what we Christians believe is historically real, and I was touched, because he's working through some of the same questions I explored, before I became a Christian.

So I started, "I have good news": we have an almost embarrassing abundance of sources evidencing the events of the week from Palm Sunday through to Easter Sunday. These sources include eye-witness testimonies from people who were there, and carefully collected sources compiled later.

This is compelling, because historians look for trustworthy sources close to the events reported, and ideally, multiple sources attesting the same events. So, happily, 2 Peter 1.16 for example states, "we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about Jesus, but were eyewitnesses". 1 John 1.3 even reveals the author's motives for writing, saying, "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us."

Palm Sunday is one of the most critical moments within these accounts, allowing historians like Sanders to draw a causal line from the Triumphal Entry today to the Passion just less than a week later.

For instance, all four Gospels record that Jesus rode in on a donkey, and they marvel that this fulfilled Old Testament prophecy, recorded around 600 years earlier. All four gospels record the large crowd coming to witness this prophetic entry, waving branches and shouting.

Interestingly, St Matthew, St Mark, and St Luke don't name palm branches specifically, but St John does, and so the day is named.

We, like these First Century witnesses, journey with Jesus this Holy Week.

Observe what he does – his authority in the Temple, his humility at the Table, and his obedience on the Cross.

These are not just historical facts to recall, but experiences to participate in, mystically, and opportunities, too, to invite friends and family to journey on with us. This week, can you find three people to invite to church, in person or online, inviting them to share in this historically factual, and mystically present experience of Holy Week? Let's welcome them together, at any of our services this coming week.

One final detail I want to end with is that the Palm Sunday event is, for a historian, one of *the* biggest contributing factors to Jesus' death just six days (t)hence, on Good Friday.

St Luke 19.39 observes that, as Jesus entered the city – on the donkey, to the adoration of the palm-waving crowd – some of the Pharisees, who were resentful of Jesus, said to him, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!”

Why did they want Jesus to rebuke these cheering disciples? The reason is simple. The cheers showed that the crowd thought that Jesus was the Messiah, fulfilling the ancient prophecies about a king entering Jerusalem on a donkey. If Jesus failed to rebuke them, it showed he himself was accepting this mantle, owning the title, and claiming the prophecy.

But Jesus replies, “If the people keep quiet, the stones will cry out.” (Luke 19.40)

Palm Sunday is the momentous incident when Jesus publicly accepts Messianic kingship, and therefore also the moment of his fatal disowning by the religious hierarchy.

Sanders offers as explanation for the Jewish leaders' actions their fear of the Romans. In the previous decades, the Roman army had massacred anyone who claimed to be liberator of the Jews, and if the crowds' acclaiming of Jesus was not rejected by Jesus, then the Romans could likely massacre the people to suppress this apparent insurrection. So St John 11.50 reports the Jewish high council soon ruling, "it is better that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish."

From today, as we enter Holy Week, the plot to kill Jesus is most certainly afoot.