Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

The week that led up to the crucifixion of Jesus is known as Passion Week. It ended with Jesus being crucified on Friday. And it is commonly believed that this event, Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem on a donkey, happened on the Sunday before. It is one of the very few events of Jesus’ life that is recorded in all four Gospels. So it was clearly a very important moment. And because of the palm branches waved by the crowds, this event is known in the church calendar as Palm Sunday. Palm Sunday will be observed this year on Sunday, April 14, with Good Friday coming on April 19. And usually, provided I remember, I like to include a hymn that is relevant to Palm Sunday and maybe to refer to it in prayer, perhaps.

But what we want to do today is to think about the significance of this event. Why did this happen? Why the donkey? Why the Palm branches? What is the meaning of what the people cried out? What are we to make of John’s explanation of this event and the response of the Pharisees? And what we will see is that there was a lot of misunderstanding about Jesus and this event that day. So we will have to ask how the same misunderstanding might occur today. And as ever, because John records everything so that we may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing in Him we might have life in His name, we want to see how this event reveals Jesus as the Christ.

And we will do this as we read about **the arrival in Jerusalem of the Lamb-King**. So let me explain why that is our sermon theme:

1. First of all, our understanding of this event is helped by considering **recent events**.

* As we have seen in John’s Gospel, Jesus has visited Jerusalem at least a couple of times during His public ministry. And every visit to Jerusalem was making the Jewish leaders more and more angry with Jesus. In ch. 7, for example, we read that Jesus “*purposely stay[ed] away from Judea because the Jews there were waiting to take His life*.” His last visit to Jerusalem, for the Feast of Tabernacles and Dedication, which was just a few months before this event, included a few attempts to arrest Him and stone Him. It ended with the Jewish leaders agreeing to kill Him and giving orders to everyone to report Him so that He could be arrested. So the religious temperature in Jerusalem, concerning Jesus, is at absolute boiling point.
* Mark, in his Gospel, tells us that as Jesus was heading to Jerusalem with His disciples, He said to them, “*See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn Him to death and deliver Him over to the Gentiles. And they will mock Him and spit on Him, and flog Him and kill Him*.”
* So recent events helps us to understand this event. Everything that happens over these next few days is a part of God’s sovereign plan to bring the Lord Jesus to the cross. Let me point you to a verse in Acts 2 that states this explicitly. Please turn to **Acts 2:23** (p.910). Peter is preaching to a crowd of Jews in Jerusalem 50 days after Jesus rose from the dead. Look what He says there: “*This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men*.” So the crucifixion of Jesus was according to the definite plan of God. God had ordained that it would happen on that Friday and He sovereignly controlled everything that brought it about. And this is not to excuse human responsibility. As Peter said to the Jews in v23 says, “*You crucified and killed [Him]*.” So what we have in this verse is the wonderful mystery of God’s sovereignty and human responsibility. You and I are entirely responsible for every choice we make and every word we say and all that we do or do not do. But God is also totally sovereign. There is not a single molecule in all of creation that is outside the sovereign control of God. And the right response to this truth is Hallelujah! Praise God that He is in control! That is a God worth worshipping!
* The key point though is that this event is not a political rally; it is not Jesus trying to win the people over by acting like a king; no, this is Jesus goading or provoking the Jewish leaders into action to bring about the events that He knows must happen.

1. But a second part of understanding this event is that **it was necessary to fulfill Scripture**. This is implied in John’s account where he says in v14 that Jesus sat on a donkey, “*just as it is written*,” and then quotes our earlier reading from Zechariah 9. But it is stated very explicitly in **Matthew’s account** where we read, “*This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet*.”

* Zechariah's prophecy comes from around 500BC. He said that the promised king would come to His people, “*sitting on a donkey’s colt*.” So it was necessary for Jesus to do this.
* And to us this may seem a little odd at first. We might think that as God Jesus should not be bound by anything. But the **doctrine of the Trinity** demands a unity between the persons of the Trinity. Jesus has often described how He is one with the Father. So we would expect then, if He is the Son of God, that there would be a unity in what the Father has revealed and required and what the Lord Jesus does. And there is.
* But Jesus’ perfect submission to the Father’s will is also **a very important part of our salvation**. You see, because God is perfect, His children must be perfectly obedient. But you and I cannot produce that perfect obedience ourselves. But Jesus did. And His perfection is credited to us as we believe in Him for the forgiveness of our sins. In Christ, we become God’s perfectly obedient children, even though you and I still struggle with obedience. So it is a wonderful encouragement for us that Jesus did this to fulfill Scripture.

1. But closely connected with that last point is the third part of understanding this event, which is that **it also reveals the character of our Saviour**. **Zechariah 9:9** describes the coming King as “*righteous and having salvation … humble* and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

* Way back in **Genesis 49**, there is a prophecy that Israel’s king will come from the tribe of **Judah**. Well, Israel’s first king was Saul. But Saul was from the tribe of? Benjamin. So he was not the promised King. David, on the other hand, *was* from the tribe of Judah. And God promised David that one of His sons would be the eternal king.
* Well, after David came? **Solomon**. And listen to how Solomon was crowned: “*Zadok the priest [and] Nathan the prophet … went down and put Solomon on King David's mule and escorted him to Gihon. Zadok the priest took the horn of oil from the sacred tent and anointed Solomon. Then they sounded the trumpet and all the people shouted, "Long live King Solomon!" And all the people went up after him, playing flutes and rejoicing greatly, so that the ground shook with the sound*.” So there we see a Son of David sitting on a mule/donkey as he goes to be crowned. So a donkey’s colt is biblically symbolic.
* But it is also the time of a feast in Jerusalem. And **in Leviticus 23:40**, God says this to His people about a Feast He required them to observe, “On the first day you are to take … **palm branches** … and rejoice before the LORD your God.” So the use of palm branches has ceremonial significance.
* And the words that the people cry out here are from **Psalm 118**. This Psalm ends a group of 6 Psalms that are known as the Hallel or Hallelujah Psalms. They were the Psalms that were sung by the people when they gathered in Jerusalem for the great feasts. And Psalm 118 was a special favourite of the people because it celebrated the victory of Israel’s King. And the people would sing these words of Psalm 118 when they greeted the king, “*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD*”; the same words spoken by this crowd in v13. But the Psalm continues, “*From the house of the LORD we bless you. The LORD is God, and He has made his light shine upon us. With branches in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns of the altar*.” And so, it was right for Jesus to be greeted with branches in hand and with these words.
* But a word you do not find in Psalm 118 is the word “**Hosanna**.” *Hosanna* means “*save, we pray; save now*.” And here we have to contrast what the crowd is doing with what Mary did in the passage before. As we noted, Mary understood that Jesus was going to die for her. So she expressed her devotion with a symbolic act – she anointed him with burial perfume. But as this vast crowd greets Jesus with Palm branches and cries out Hosanna – save us, why are they doing this? What kind of king are they greeting? What kind of salvation are they expecting? And I am not asking us to do some guesswork. John gives us answers to these questions in vv16-18. We learn first of all that even His disciples did not properly understand this event at the time. They would have been waving branches and yelling out Hosannas with the rest of them. But like we have read earlier in John, the people expect a king who will save them from? The Romans! That is the type of king *they want Jesus to be*. That is the salvation they want. And in vv17-18, John explains that the reason the crowd went to meet Jesus was that they had heard that He had raised Lazarus from death. So they see a miracle working king. Now there is a king who can smash Romans. Woohoo! If such things would have been available back then, they would have worn MIGA hats – Make Israel Great Again!
* But zero attention was being paid to what Zechariah had said about this king being *righteous* and *humble* and *having salvation*. And that only became clear to the disciples after Jesus died and rose and ascended to heaven and poured out His Spirit, which is what “*when Jesus was glorified*” means in v16.
* Brothers and Sisters, young people and boys and girls, our sermon theme is that this event describes the arrival in Jerusalem of **the lamb-king**. You have heard a lot said about Jesus as the King. But what about the lamb bit? Why is Jesus the lamb-king?
  + Well, look back at 12:1: “***Six days before the Passover***.” And Passover was the feast when each household had to kill a lamb and put its blood on the doorposts to remember the very first time that was done back in Egypt. For on that night, the Angel of the Lord passed over any house that had lamb’s blood on the door and went in and killed the firstborn son in every house that did not have the lamb’s blood on the door. So the Passover meal was six days away.
  + But in v12 we are told that this was “***the next day***.” And there are all sorts of fascinating debates about the exact order of the days of this week and what day each event happened, but the key point is it was a few days before the Passover.
  + Historians tell us that around 50,000 people were full-time residents in Jerusalem. But at Passover time, because all Jewish males were required to go to Jerusalem for the feast, **Jerusalem’s population swelled** to anywhere between 1- 2.5 million people, depending on which historian you believe. There was a massive population increase. And not all of them could fit into the houses in the city. So you had people living in the towns and villages around Jerusalem and even camping.
  + And what happened was that in days leading up to Passover, **thousands of Passover lambs** that were to be sacrificed were taken up into the city and then kept for three days in the homes of the people who were to eat them. And Josephus, a Jewish historian, tells us that one year a census was taken and the number of lambs killed for Passover was around 256,000. And you don’t just bring 256,000 lambs into a city in 10 minutes. So as Jesus is arriving in Jerusalem, we can be pretty sure that He is surrounded by Passover lambs. And even if it wasn’t the exact day of the Passover lamb procession, 256,500 lambs make a lot of noise, wherever they are!
  + So look back now at **John 1:29**. How did John the Baptist describe Jesus at the very beginning of His public ministry? “*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*!”
  + This is how the disciples and the people **should have understood this event**. They should have added up all that Jesus had done and said, all that the OT said about Messiah, and all that people like John the Baptist had said about Jesus, and welcomed Him as the *lamb-*King – He who would be king by becoming the perfect sacrifice for our sins.
  + And you know, the people who came closest to understanding this were the **Pharisees**. Look at what they say in v19, “*Look, the world has gone after Him*.” For even though they didn’t mean it this way, Jesus had come to be the Saviour of the world – male, female, young, old, rich, poor, slave, master, Chinese, African, Jew, Kiwi, Niuean, Australian, Irish, Iraqi, Zambian, “*whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life*.”
* So how about you? How do you understand Jesus? Are you like the crowd who wanted a king that suited their agenda? If you have listened to a professing Christian explain why he or she thinks that homosexuals should be welcomed into church membership or ordained as ministers, you will hear that person say something like, “Jesus loved everyone and today Jesus would stand with homosexuals as an oppressed minority. And Jesus would condemn you like He did the Pharisees because you are homophobic haters. And if you do not stand with us you are against Jesus.” Well, that is the exact same mistake that the crowd made back then – Using Jesus for your own political or religious agenda. Because you cannot get any clearer than the words of 1 Cor. 6 that tell us that amongst other sins, those who practice homosexuality will not inherit the kingdom of God unless they repent of their sins and believe in Jesus.
* Now, Jesus did come with an agenda. And that agenda, as we have seen, was to save His people from their sins and to sanctify them by the Holy Spirit. Do you believe that Jesus is the Lamb-king who came to take away your sin and guilt? I hope so. Are you striving for holiness? Are you as zealous and passionate about growing in godliness as people are about their favourite political cause? I happened to see a small part of a documentary the other day about the work of the Sea-shepherd folk who are trying to expose illegal fishing. They had two boats, both with crew. They followed this one fishing boat for 110 days until they had sufficient evidence. Imagine the cost of doing that! That is stunning commitment. Are you that committed to growing in godliness? Are you working hard to recognize all the sin in your life and to tear it out and leave it behind? I hope so.
* Well Brothers and Sisters, young people and boys and girls, praise God or sending His Son, the Lamb-king, to be our Saviour and Lord. And all God’s people said… Amen.