

## Palm Sunday 2012 Nigel Taber-Hamilton

So here we are: Palm Sunday; a day of great drama, where Jesus' actions were much more important, and much more powerful, than any words he could have spoken.

Let's begin by considering his audience – a specific group. How do we know? Because of where Jesus was staying for Passover: Bethany. He had three close friends there: Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. And it was free! Jesus, remember adopted a sort of programmed homelessness, relying on the kindness of his inner circle. He had little money to pay the exorbitant prices of Jerusalem during Passover. The population of Jerusalem went from around 35,000 to over 100,000 – so it's not hard to figure out what you'd have to pay to find lodgings.

So the poorer pilgrims would stay outside Jerusalem – in rented caves, or with friends or relatives – and anyway, this was Jesus' constituency – the people of the land, the Am Haratz.

To get to Jerusalem from Bethany, which is east of the city, you climb to the ridge that the gospels call the "Mount of Olives" – a place that, in the First Century, was covered in olive groves. From that ridge you can look across the Kidron valley to Jerusalem – about a mile and a half away. From there you drop down to cross that valley, where, the Jew's believed, the general resurrection would begin. So the Kidron Valley was the biggest cemetery in Israel.

Today – the day we call Palm Sunday – likely wasn't his first Trip to Jerusalem at Passover. But it was a big day, this first day of the festival. It's easy to imagine tens of thousands of pilgrims, all walking in the same direction, pouring over that hilltop like a wave – not only down the only narrow road from the North and East but also walking among the olive groves either side of it toward the Temple.

Toward the Temple in Jerusalem. The Hebrew name Jerusalem, "Yer-u-sulam-a." means **the City of the Home of Peace**. Since the time of King Solomon – the name "Solomon" means "Peaceful" – rulers of Israel had entered from the East side, riding on a donkey, an ass. That message is unmistakable: "I come in peace".

Pretty much every Jew couldn't miss the meaning of what was about to happen either later that day or the next on the other side of the city – at the western gate of Jerusalem: the Roman military Governor, Pontius Pilate, would be arriving from Caesaria Maritima – the coastal headquarters of the Roman Governor of Judea and entering the city not as a tourist or pilgrim, but – in a show of Roman imperial force – as soldiers.. Pilate would be riding his war-horse in full battle armor followed by a full battalion of soldiers and mounted infantry, also in full battle armor.

For any faithful Jew this would have been a huge insult – it was the privilege of Jerusalem that rulers came in peace. Rome's message was two-fold: "we don't care" and "Don't even think about messing with us!"

So how would you protest a violation of the peace of Jerusalem? Re-enact a ruler's peaceful entry! It's not by accident that early Christians called Jesus "king" and "savior" thereby saying that Caesar wasn't either of these things – Jesus himself modeled that message. While there were likely no Romans around to see this direct challenge, word of Jesus' actions must

have spread like wildfire! Symbols are powerful things!

**Now you know the reason for the donkey.** And it's a pretty safe bet to assume that the Twelve disciples put the word out that Jesus was going to do this – the crowd were primed.

And the crowd responded with symbolism of their own – they looked around for any palm trees they could find and ripped off the branches and threw them in his path – because palms held their own symbolism. In the Torah palm trees were symbols of God's promise of a land of milk and honey, and were used for the festival of booths – both reminders of the core story of Israel: freedom from slavery. So Palm branches had become a symbol for Israel. Lining Jesus' path with palm branches would be like lining the streets with the Stars and Stripes on July Fourth for a presidential visit – a double celebration of national identity and of the coming of one representing the people. **Now you know the reason for the palm branches.**

And lastly, there's the cry: "Hosanna!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord". "Hosanna" was a liturgical word sung every morning during the Festival of Booths – so you can see why the crowd would have cried that word while holding palm branches – it was the word linked to the palm booths of the festival. It doesn't mean what you think it means. **It doesn't mean "Hooray". It means "save us".... "save us from the Romans like God saved us from the Egyptians."**

So if you want a stark contrast for this day it's this: Jewish Palm branches vs. Roman Laurel wreaths. The palms were a direct challenge the Roman victory wreaths: peace through non-violence, opposed peace through war. **Now you know the reason for the palm branches - which certainly asks some contemporary questions now, doesn't it?!**

It's entirely possible that this act alone – even aside from the overturning of the money-changer's tables – is what brought Jesus to the attention of the Romans. It certainly sets the stage for the coming week, where there'll be a sort of hide-and-seek, where Jesus appears in the Temple precincts to teach then disappears into the crowd. The Romans will look for him to arrest him, but they won't be able to find him until he decides it is time.

So this is Palm Sunday.

- Today we remember the second ride of a "King Peaceful" into the City of the Home of Peace.
- Today we carry the branches of palm – signs of hope for the ultimate and peaceful victory of God's grace.
- Today we cry "Hosanna!"...God save us from those who proclaim that peace is only possible through war in which the poor always lose.
- Today we march beside Jesus.

The only question for us is this. When the shouting dies down, and the crowds disperse, will we continue to walk with him – in spite of the cost – tomorrow?

And the next day.....

And the next day.....