

Emptying, Falling

Palm Sunday, 29th March 2026

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Matthew 21.1-11, Psalm 118. 1-2, 19-29, Philippians 2.5-11, John 12.20-32

Through the written word and the spoken word may we know your Living Word, Jesus Christ our Saviour, Amen

Let us reflect on the green cross we have received today. It is made of a size to hold in the hand. A palm cross in both senses of the word.

At the beginning of Lent, we burnt the dried-up palm crosses from last year to make the ash that anointed our foreheads, so we might go through the following weeks with a heightened sense of our mortality. In a spiritual sense we may have practiced being empty-handed. But today, four weeks later at this turning point marking the end of Lent and the beginning of Holy Week, we are once again holding a new, still green, palm cross.

What do you do with your palm cross? Some people carry it with them – in a wallet or bag – to have ready to hold wherever they go. I used to do this when I worked in an office – it was reassuring at times of stress - a kind of secret talisman for strength or a reminder to ask myself WWJD. We might hold it in our mind's eye by pinning it to a wall – perhaps near the front door to bless our going out, and our coming in. Or perhaps in the kitchen in the heart of the home, or over a desk, or by our bed, which is where I lay mine these days – something to hold as the day's thoughts distil, the last thing to see before sleep and the first thing to see upon waking. Or perhaps as a bookmark – something that speaks to us in quiet and peaceful moments. If it is something we hold onto, it also becomes the holder of our prayers and experiences, our fears and hopes, and the many things that we might bring back to be turned to ash next year.

Our tradition is seasonal and cyclical –and this little cross put into our waiting hand reassures us, as we prepare to hear the hardest part of the Christian story over the coming days - that what is empty will once again become full. It is also a reminder of the wonderful paradox and mystery, known in the Eastern Orthodox tradition as *kenosis*, and celebrated by mystics such as St John of the Cross. God is emptied in creation and the Incarnation, and Christ is self-emptied on the cross. God is forever emptied yet always full. And so, it is by emptying ourselves that we are filled with divine grace and grow into the likeness of Christ. As Paul exhorts us “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus who ... emptied himself ... humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death in a cross.” (Phil 2.5-8)

Today, unusually, we have used the Lectionary's supplementary gospel reading from John as well as the gospel of the palms from Matthew. Both speak to this self-emptying love of Christ, and both challenge us to also empty ourselves in some way.

First, we have Jesus provocatively and knowingly entering Jerusalem, having stirred the passions of the people as well as the ire of the authorities. He comes on the colt of a donkey – as he knew the prophet Zechariah said a future king would. Matthew is the only gospel account to mention the mother donkey coming along as well – which may be a different interpretation of Zechariah to the other gospels which only mention a colt, or young donkey. But the point being made by all the gospel writers, by Zechariah and by Jesus is that here is a king who would banish the weapons of war from the land - donkeys being a beast of peacetime, unlike the horses ridden in war, and with a colt or foal of a donkey being a further sign of humility. We might also remember the way Jesus seeks out and raises up the smallest, and most overlooked – children, women, outsiders and outcasts.

Being at the time of Passover, the Romans are mobilising, as they did each year, to quell potential uprising among the Jewish people of the occupied and oppressed city. As Jesus rides into Jerusalem from Galilee in the north, the Governor of Judea processes, with horses and chariots and armoured soldiers from the west. But the point Jesus is making in riding a colt is lost upon many in the crowd, who come to hail a King who they hope will take up arms and defeat the imperial force of Rome, and will turn upon him in the days to come. They wave palms, signs of victory, but many do not understand what kind of victory Christ will bring – palms representing peace after victory in battle, become instead for followers of Christ, so many small crosses representing victory and

peace won through self-emptying love. Others are offended by the kingly symbolism, fear its consequences, and plot his destruction. Jesus empties himself by resisting the pressure to be a military hero or to make no stand at all, by facing danger, by speaking of an alternative kind of liberation, in the face of worldly power.

This gospel also challenges us to empty ourselves – by being among those in the crowd who welcome the Prince of Peace – who resist the call of pointless, self-perpetuating violence – and continue to follow the example of the teacher on a donkey even when everyone else it seems has turned against him. How powerful is this call at this troubling point in time – how compelling the still point held by voices for peace in the current chaos, as international law breaks down amid terrifying shows of force, unleashing suffering on an enormous scale.

The reading from John's gospel, picks up just after the entrance into Jerusalem, and Jesus is facing up to the fact that "the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." To explain this truth to his puzzled disciples and to the Greeks who were not of the Jewish faith – and represent all people drawn to hear, he uses a beautiful example – which is not so much a simple metaphor as an explanation of the workings of divine life and love in all creation:

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit.

I know some find the idea of the dying seed a little odd – for is a seed not full of potential life? But let's think about what happens to a grain of wheat. When a plant passes its most ripe and fruitful stage the time soon comes for it to either wither or lie dormant for a season. At that point, grains are released or fall or are eaten by a bird who will drop it elsewhere! The grain then lies dormant, and we might say this is a kind of death as it lies buried in the earth or under fallen leaves, hidden from the light and sight. Some seeds will indeed rot and die if conditions are not right, and some will lay dormant for many years. But even a grain that germinates and sends shoots up to the light can also be said to undergo a type of death as the sprout from the germ breaks through the bran and endosperm, bursting out of its old empty husk to become a new life form – just as a caterpillar might be said to die as it metamorphoses into a butterfly. The grain, in a sense, dies to its old self, as it ceases to be a grain and becomes a young plant that will grow and flourish and produce many new grains which will either become nourishing food, or fall to the earth to repeat the cycle ad infinitum.

And so, at a certain point in our own lives, the time also comes to leave our old self, fall to earth and lie dormant for time, until something new and wonderful germinates. As Jesus teaches, if we love our old life – perhaps our old life of self-limiting negativity or passivity, of self-centredness, of blindness, or stagnation, or whatever it is that holds us in its grip – if we cling to it and refuse to fall to the ground, we will wither on the old stem and miss the chance of transformation and abundant life.

But there is more to it than self-realisation. "Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also." Jesus asks us to follow him – and perhaps to do that we must die to our limited selves - but Jesus dies for "all people," and somehow, he asks us to follow him there too. We are asked to live not only for ourselves but for others, and to bear much fruit in the world.

With this teaching of the grain of wheat, Jesus calls all people to follow him through death to life. He was lifted up on the cross, died and fell into the earth, where he lay entombed for three days. This Holy Week, and every week, we are asked to follow him and to fall with him, to stumble on the path, take his broken body down from the cross, and then to wait in darkness - wait for the life force that refuses to be silenced or killed off, to emerge and overcome the very worst that humanity is capable of.

The tomb, as we will celebrate next Sunday, will be left empty as this life springs forth defeating hate and death – and driving out the "rulers of this world."

May we hold our palm crosses through this Holy Week and through the year to come as a reminder of this call to follow, and to participate in the eternal mysteries of emptying and filling, falling and rising. Amen