Palm Sunday April 5, 2020

Rev. Neil Parker, Vienna Community Church

# Palm (Cedar) Sunday

I spent several years in ministry on Canada’s Pacific Coast: Vancouver, Burnaby, Comox, Courtenay in British Columbia. This is the region of the world of the Spirit Bear, of the old-growth cedar. The house I spent my school years in had two huge cedar trees growing in the front yard, and cedar hedges bordered the property. So, when we considered what we would grab to wave and shout “Hosanna” it was always the cedar tree branches. The sharp, woody smell and the evergreen still remind me of Palm (Cedar) Sunday. Not palms.

Approximately 20% of sermons by Canadian preachers reference hockey at least once, so …

## So I’ll tell you this story

I was attending a tournament one weekend; not, as it happens, a hockey tournament, but a lacrosse tournament. My mother remembers it as the one during which I had my nose broken, when I blocked a shot with my face. I still have problems years later when my allergies kick up. But that’s not the story.

The first evening, there were no games being played. So, of course, we went to a hockey game. Note that hockey and lacrosse, in the West Coast provinces, are rivals for attention and for rink space. Hockey rinks have the ice melted in the spring, and that’s when the lacrosse players take over. Of course, since the two sports are similar, there is a lot of overlap in the players themselves, with a number of them swapping out skates for sneakers and hockey sticks for lacrosse sticks and carrying on with barely a pause.[[1]](#footnote-1)

So, there we were, a small bunch of sports fans from an entirely different city, watching two local teams play. I don’t remember who was playing that evening, and you wouldn’t know them anyway. Suffice to say, one was the red team, and the other was the white team.

“Who are we rooting for?” I asked the guy sitting next to me. Nobody in our group was from either community, but I was sure that there were favourites. He just said, out of the side of his mouth, “You’ll see.”

Sure enough, a few minutes later, a three-on-two break lead to a shot on goal, bouncing off the goalie’s pads, and was neatly flicked into the upper corner by the center, a small but impossibly quick blur of red. The arena burst into …..

**… Silence**.

“Not those guys” my friend pointed out.

## Who to cheer for

Sports fans know, that you have to know who to cheer for. Anybody who says, “Oh, I just enjoy the game” is looked at suspiciously. We also know to avoid the person who wants to explain too much about the game, what the point spread is, who is the assistant coach’s mentor, why the team’s crest in the 1980s made more sense than the one before the one they wear now.

Much the same thing was going on, that day when Jesus made the triumphant entry into Jerusalem. Yes, it was a spontaneous gathering of people celebrating the arrival of a celebrity. But everybody knew what teams were playing. There was the Roman, “Home Team” advantage. The ones that had occupied Jerusalem and established a puppet government. The Romans promised good governments, law and order, and the chariots ran on time. All you had to do was toe the line; don’t cause any trouble. We know who’s supposed to win on the home ice.

Jesus, though, represents the underdog team. Nobody really expects that team to win, but they just might. They just might. Perhaps, if we turn out with our team colours and team cheers and let them know that we’re on their side, they’ll win this one.

So they rush to cheer the parade, the prophet seated on a donkey. That’s the sign of a coming King ([Zechariah 9:9](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Zechariah+9%3A9&version=NRSV)). And people grab palm branches and lay their clothes in his path, because that’s what you do to cheer on the team ([2 Kings 9:13](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=2+Kings+9%3A13&version=NRSV)). The symbolism is not lost on anybody – not the crowds, not the disciples, not the Romans. Everybody knows who to cheer for – or not to cheer for.

## Preachers explain too much

If you’re going to enjoy a hockey game, avoid the person who wants to explain too much about the game; what the off-side rule is, why there’s a shortage of hockey sticks right now[[2]](#footnote-2), who is the assistant coach’s mentor, and why the team’s crest in the 1980s made more sense than the one before the one they wear now. Not everything needs to be explained.

If you’d like, I could go on at length about the symbolism.

* Palm branches[[3]](#footnote-3)
* Why Matthew has Jesus sitting (awkwardly) on both a horse and a donkey[[4]](#footnote-4)
* The meaning of Hosanna[[5]](#footnote-5)
* [Psalm 118:26](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+118&version=NRSV)[[6]](#footnote-6)

But sometimes, it’s best to just sit, and watch, and see. I invite you into a holy reading, a *lectio divina[[7]](#footnote-7)*, of this passage, as part of your worship this weekend.

## What does a social-distance parade look like?

* Take a nature walk with your children, your partner, or someone from your close, safe circle. As you walk, discuss what you would do if you heard about the arrival of a very famous person you admire, right now, taking place a few hundred metres from you? Pinpoint in your mind where the closest parade route might be. What street, what Platz, is close enough to you to reach it in a few minutes of fast walking?
* What would you grab to wave? Could you make it to *Libro* or *Pagro* in time to buy poster board (unlikely)? Is there an *altpapier* bin close by, perhaps with some cardboard that you could grab? Do you have something that could make a sign?
* What articles of clothing do you have that you could grab, and wave? Scarves, yes. Brightly coloured shopping bags? Is it warm enough to take off a coat?
* Is there something growing you could grab (with suitable awareness of respect for the environment and not damaging public property). I doubt there’s a palm tree in view … but what else?
* Take in the sights and smells. Look at the people around you (at an appropriate distance apart). Imagine what might happen if you all heard a commotion. Would all of you run towards it? Some of you? Why? Why not?
* Pray for those around you, those with you, those who were with Jesus, those who follow Jesus, those who seek Jesus, those who shout and those who pray quietly.
* Say a prayer for yourself, and shout, “Hosanna!”
1. Nerd note: a lacrosse stick is called, properly, a “crosse”. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It’s because of the Corona virus. This is important news in Canada. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/coronavirus-hockey-sticks-1.5459607>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The palm branch is a symbol of victory, triumph, peace, and eternal life originating in the ancient Near East and Mediterranean world. Interestingly enough … only one of the gospels (John) mentions palm branches at all. So we should call it “clothes on the street” Sunday … [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Gospel writers each tell this story ([Mark 11:1-10](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+11%3A1-10&version=NRSV); [Luke 19:28-38](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+19%3A28-38&version=NRSV); [John 12:12-18](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+12%3A12-18&version=NRSV)). But Matthew is taking his details from the Scriptures, from Zechariah 9:9, where it refers to “… mounted on an ass, and on a colt.” This is standard Hebrew poetry, using repeated lines where we might use rhyme. Matthew takes it literally, perhaps because he is so excited to make connections between what it happening and what was promised. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Hosanna* is a prayer to God, meaning, “O Save (us)” but it has taken on the meaning of a celebration cheer, much like “Hallelujah!” The hockey equivalent is the singing of “We will, we wil, rock you!” which, of course, has nothing to do with rocking somebody. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Click on the link to go to the Psalm. It’s a song of victory, and look at all the connections: open the gates; the stone rejected; the day the Lord has made, and more. We sing these in many of our hymns. And particularly this verse, quoted in the reading: “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.” Jesus is being identified as God’s victory. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Lectio divina* is a method of Bible study and prayer, that some of looked at during the Retreat a few weeks back. Traditionally, lectio divina has four separate steps: read; meditate; pray; contemplate. First a passage of scripture is read, then its meaning is reflected upon. This is followed by prayer and contemplation on the Word of God. It’s not a study, it’s an exercise in entering into the event itself, through imagination and prayer. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)