

02.04.23

Palm Sunday

Opening Prayer

Lord please give us ears to hear your word and hearts to respond to your love. Amen.

It was wonderful to see and hear the merry band singing through the Village earlier, led by Pippa the donkey, and to gather outside with her, just as the crowd on Palm Sunday did when Jesus passed through on his way to Jerusalem.

It wasn't just Pippa leading that procession, however, it was also **the cross**. And as always on Palm Sunday, each one of us received a piece of palm leaf shaped into a cross... as a reminder that this week has a clear and awesome destination.

I hope you will journey through the week, in your own times of prayer, in the services here each evening until Thursday when we remember the Last Supper, and I hope you will come to worship on Friday, Good Friday, barely noted around us except as an unexplained bank holiday with inconvenient shopping times... Come on Friday to remember Jesus, to stand at the the cross, to worship the onw who gave and achieved all for us and all humankind.

But back to the donkey, for a moment.

Listen to these words from a poem, *Donkey Day*, by Janet Lees.

**Cross-marked beast
bearing cross-marked Christ,
what is your message today
as you travel the palm-strewn way?**

**Stumbling on a stony track,
people's coats on your back,
you were chosen for faithfulness.**

**This is a calling we share,
as the cross-marked hill
comes closer still.....**

**May we, his cross-marked people,
bear him just as faithfully.**

I have been struck by that phrase, '**cross-marked**'. What does it mean for us, this week, *to be Christ's cross-marked people?*

Two weeks ago we held a baptism and as always, I made the sign of the cross on the baby's forehead with the oil we collect every year from the cathedral on Maundy Thursday, blessed by our bishop for the purpose of this signing. So Millie is now 'cross marked' – rather as we see new-born lambs marked, to show whose flock they belong to, and to match them to their mums in case they get lost. In the same way, our crosses at baptism are a sign that we

belong to Christ's flock and that it's God who feeds and cares for us, who will provide all we need.

The baptised people of God are cross-marked in this way and God's baptism promises to us never fail, even when we fail to keep ours.

Today we also held our **palm crosses** high, another reminder that we are Christ's cross-marked people.

Do take yours home, but please **don't** put it in a drawer out of sight, put it where it will be seen, by you and others. Take time as you look at it each day, to pray- for strength in your own life and situation, for those dear to you who are suffering, for the needs of others far away. Allow the Holy Spirit to guide you in prayer.

And you might like to take a spare palm cross to give to someone who couldn't come to church today, and pray with or for them as you do so. Let's be God's cross-marked people this week, unashamed and thankful for the saving love of Christ in our lives.

So when people ask us what we're doing for Easter, lets tell them we'll be coming to church, remind them what this festival is all about and invite them to come with us.

We are cross marked because we follow our King, the cross-marked Christ

When we say someone is *marked* it means their fate, or in Jesus' case, his purpose, is already sealed and decided. Jesus' whole life is shaped and guided by his Father's plan, he lives out God's purpose to save the world through him. Jesus is marked, marked for the cross.

Remember the myrrh which he was given as a baby, myrrh used to embalm the dead? Remember his words, that whoever would gain their life must lose it, that we must take up the cross and follow him? Remember how, as he spent time with his disciples through three years of, healings, miracles and teaching, he explained that he *would* go up to Jerusalem and be handed over to suffer and die at the hands of sinful humanity? And now that time has come.

Jesus' carefully staged arrival in Jerusalem is purposefully planned, sending two disciples to fetch the donkey and her colt, in fulfilment of what was written in the prophecy of Zechariah, to fulfil God's purpose for his cross marked life.

Jesus is also a marked man to the religious authorities and the Romans who are alarmed by his popularity, the crowds he draws, the people he mixes with. They 'have his number'. Jesus is *cross marked* already..

And us, Is it clear in our lives that we too are cross-marked?

Do we align ourselves with Christ in the way we live?

Do we live by God's priorities, standing up for justice, honesty and compassion, or do we mingle with the crowd, say and do nothing?

Through our Bible readings this week we' ll remember what a hard road it was for Jesus' disciples, who failed, deserted and betrayed him, and so it is today for Christians around the

world, faced with discrimination and persecution for living out their faith in Christ.
To be known as a Christian is to be cross-marked.

We may not face such acute or overt persecution or discrimination, but the road we walk this week may not be easy, if we are prepared to walk it with Christ, to look beyond the chicks and bunnies to the real Easter story, to see what it cost for us to be forgiven and reconciled to God, through Christ's death on the cross?

But thanks be to God that, because of the unending love poured out for us in Christ's sacrifice on the cross, that cross is now the way to forgiveness, peace and eternal life.
The cross he bore is life and health, though pain and death to him, as the hymn puts it.

Yes we are *cross marked* and this may mean times of suffering, *but we are also cross marked with the love of Christ and our new life in Christ*, and so we are called to share his love and life with others.

Lets return, in closing, to the example of Jesus, in today's gospel reading and to the powerful verses we heard from Philippians.

Just as Christ was obedient to death, even death on a cross,
when we are cross-marked we obey Christ, his instructions to us.

We tune in to his voice asking us to serve others, to put others first, to do the unexpected, like those two disciples fetching the donkey and her colt. We obey because Jesus walks the path of obedience ahead of us and with us, we are never alone, however hard the path may be.

Just as Jesus humbled himself to become a human being, and rode on an ordinary donkey, when we are cross-marked, we walk humbly, not arrogantly.
I was reminded of this in Durham recently, when visiting friends remarked on the outsized statue in the Market Place, of the Marquis of Londonderry on his charger, looking down on others, triumphant and proud.. Such images of power are widely imitated in our world today, albeit horses replaced by tanks, rockets, private jets and limos. And we're not immune to these power games, lets be honest. We need Christ to teach us to walk humbly.

What a very different image of power that statue is from the one Jesus shows us today. Jesus who walks humbly and obediently into

Jerusalem towards the cross, riding on a donkey...

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Amen.