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Today is Palm Sunday. Palm Sunday is the day for celebrating Jesus’ last entry into Jerusalem to die on the cross. At that time, a large crowd was in the city for Passover, and when they heard that Jesus was coming, they welcomed him with immense enthusiasm by taking palm branches and praising him. Let’s watch what had happened.

[Video clip#1: Jesus enters into Jerusalem]

Through this video clip, we can imagine how popular Jesus was then; we can feel the crowd’s excitement to see Jesus with their own eyes. According to today’s Gospel reading, people shouted like this, “Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest heaven.” Here, ‘Hosanna’ means “Save us.”

Those proclamations were remarkable because they showed the people’s faith that Jesus was the Messiah. Due to Jesus’ miraculous healing ministry, there were many followers believing in his divinity, but at the same time there were also a considerable number of people who had severely criticised his radical teachings and tried to arrest and kill him.

Thus, given that context, the massive support and faith declarations in public were surprising. Thankfully, the Apostle John explains how the situation had changed dramatically in his book as follows: “A crowd had come to meet Jesus because they had seen him call Lazarus out of the tomb. They kept talking about him and this miracle.” Yes, the event of raising Lazarus had caused explosive reactions.

[2]

A huge number of people seemed to hear about the incredible news and began to believe that Jesus was the Son of God. The remarkable thing is that they showed their excitement not only by spreading their cloaks on the road but also by waving palm branches. What was the significance of the palm branch to them? Interestingly, in the Bible there is nowhere that people greeted or praised their important figures using palm branches.

In the Old Testament, the Palm tree signified prosperity and fertility because of its abundant fruits and oils. The ancient Hebrew name of the palm tree was Tamar, and it was used a lot for a girl’s name because of its association with fertility. In the Scripture, for example, Judas’s daughter-in-law was Tamar, and she was recorded in the family tree of Jesus.

The tradition of waving palm branches for welcoming VIP’s was from the event of the Maccabean Revolt. The Maccabean Revolt was a Jewish rebellion lasting for seven years from 167 BC led by the Maccabee family against the Seleucid Empire.

When Judah Maccabee finally won the holy war protecting God’s temple, the people of Jerusalem welcomed and praised him when he entered into Jerusalem by waving palm branches. Since then, the palm branch had been regarded as a symbol of messianic triumph.

So the fact that people took palm branches and waved them to praise Jesus confirms how they thought of him. They trusted that Jesus came to save them from the Roman Empire as Judah Maccabee and King David did in the past. Since the Israelites had suffered for a long time from foreign rule, their acclamation was from the depths of their being.

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What’s impressive about the story of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem is that on this occasion he got on a donkey. You know, a donkey doesn’t go well with such a victorious parade. It is a working animal carrying heavy luggage, so the image of the donkey is far from thoughts of power or victory. Rather, it symbolises serving or humility.

But it’s not by chance that Jesus sat on a donkey; he intentionally designed the scene as a visual message. By entering into the holy city riding on a donkey Jesus wanted to show people that he’s the Messiah as servant rather than the Messiah as king. He came to earth to sacrifice himself for God’s people rather than to rule and control them, which was his mission and identity.

The donkey represented what he had done in the past and what he would do in the future. Interestingly, according to Matthew 21, the disciples brought to Jesus two

donkeys on that day, the mother donkey and her colt. In today’s passages, however, there’s no mention of which one Jesus took. Verse 7 just says, “They brought the donkey and its colt and laid some clothes on their backs. Then Jesus got on.”

But in chapter 11 of Mark’s Gospel, it is reported that Jesus rode on the colt, on which no one had ever ridden. Why did Jesus choose the colt then? The colt contains two meanings. First, it means the innocence of Jesus as we normally call him the Lamb of God. And it also signifies our weakness and mission.

We are weak and inexperienced like the young donkey, but our mission is to carry Jesus on to those who don’t know him. It should be very hard and painful, but so glorious and wonderful to be a channel for Jesus’ ministries. By selecting a colt, Jesus showed clearly not only his mission and identity but also our vision and calling.

Likewise, Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem was like an invisible but very fierce battle between Jesus’ way and human beings’ way. People welcomed Jesus expecting the Messiah as king, having strong power, while Jesus came as the Messiah as servant, to die on the cross powerlessly.

People wished liberation from the Roman Empire, but Jesus wanted to save them from the eternal death; they wanted to taste exclusive power and triumph through Jesus, but he proposed inclusive love and compassion to everyone on earth; they took and waved palm branches, but Jesus took a young donkey and rode on it.

The crowd followed Jesus praising him, but their expectation was totally different from his. That inharmonious coexistence didn’t last long. They exalted Jesus fervently on Sunday, but ended up with shouting to crucify him on Friday.

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Have you heard about the Pulitzer Prize? The Pulitzer Prize is the best award in journalism and literature in the world. Every year some great photographs are awarded, and I love to watch and reflect on them from time to time because they give me good insights into what’s going on around the world nowadays and how to live as a Christian. The impact that a well-taken photo can provide is massive.

If there was a religious award in the Pulitzer Prize, I think the scene of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem would be selected as one of the most influential photographs of all time in Christian history.

[Picture#1]



Look at this picture carefully. In this picture, we can see our wish, excitement, passion, and even our betrayal. We can see palm branches waved and a young donkey carrying Jesus. What an ironic moment. The bottom line is that the irony about 2000 years ago is still happening among us. Those people waving palm branches aren’t just nameless figures; they are us.

Even though Jesus showed clearly why he did come to us and what he wanted us to do as his disciples, we are still waving palm branches and expecting power and prosperity in our faith journey. We are indifferent to the meaning of donkey in our life. The disunity between our wish and Jesus’ teaching might drive us to crucify our Lord unconsciously again.

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Sisters and brothers,

If we follow Jesus still waving palm branches, let us get them down. Instead, focus on the donkey representing the true discipleship. In this regard, we had better call today Donkey Sunday rather than Palm Sunday. Furthermore, let us make our everyday to be donkey days for carrying Jesus. Amen.