

PALM SUNDAY

by Hamish Hendry

In the New Testament you have it written that Jesus entered Jerusalem for the last time riding on a colt, the foal of an donkey. Two of his disciples, acting upon the instructions of their Master, had entered a village near the Mount of Olives, and there they found the colt by the door without, in a place where two ways met. They unloosed the animal, telling those that stood by and questioned them, that the Master had need of him. Then they brought the colt to Jesus, who mounted upon its back, after some of the disciples had spread their garments thereon. It was thus that Jesus rode into Jerusalem to his death. And when the great multitude of people who were gathered to the Passover saw him coming they cut branches from the palm trees by the side of the way, and spread them on the ground before Jesus, while they cried with joyful voices: "Hosanna; blessed be the King that cometh in the name of the Lord."

In this incident you have the origin of Palm Sunday. It is the first day of Holy Week, the week which is dedicated by the Catholic Church to the commemoration of the sufferings and death of Jesus. With the early church throughout Europe it was the custom to lay the branches of a tree upon the altar on this day, and as the palm tree does not grow in Europe, the box, the yew, and especially the willow tree, were used instead. The branches were blessed by the priest, sprinkled with holy water, and then carried in procession through the town. As part of this procession it was sometimes arranged to have a figure representing Jesus sitting upon an donkey—either a living figure or one made of wood, sitting upon a wooden animal. This wooden effigy was drawn along upon wheels, and the people in the street scattered the consecrated branches before it. Flowers were sometimes used as well as the branches of trees.

It is a beautiful ceremony, this blessing of flowers and tree-branches upon Palm Sunday in memory of Christ's entry into Jerusalem, and it is one to interest all you children. But in the Middle Ages a great many unworthy things, such as the selling of palm-branches in order to avert diseases, became associated with Palm Sunday. Indeed, that whole week, the week that should have been so solemn and sacred, was turned into an occasion of feasting and frivolity. At the Reformation many of these unworthy things were abolished, and the ceremonies in connection with Palm Sunday were considerably modified here in England. Yet in some parts of the country it is still a custom to go a-palming—that is to say, to gather willow-branches—on the day before Palm Sunday.

With the Roman Catholic Church, however, and especially in the ceremonies at Rome during Holy Week, an important place is given to Palm Sunday. The officiating priest blesses the branches, which are then distributed. In the solemn mass that follows, the people in the congregation hold the branches in their hands to the end of the service. In most cases these consecrated branches are taken home and preserved during the year; then they are burned and the ashes used upon Ash Wednesday.

Source:

Hendry, Hamish. E.F. Mason. "Palm Sunday." *Holidays & Happy Days*. London: Grant Richards, 1901. 36 – 41. Electronic.