



Palm Sunday is a Christian feast that kicks off the beginning of Holy Week. It commemorates Jesus Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. It is associated in many churches with the blessing and procession of palms. I recall the service for the whole Beacon Mission Community taking place at Woodland, with the palms blessed and distributed in the Church Hall before we processed across the road to the church.

These special ceremonies were taking place toward the end of the 4th century in Jerusalem and are described in the travelogue *Peregrinatio Etheriae (The Pilgrimage of Etheria)*. In the West, the earliest evidence of the ceremonies is found in the Bobbio Sacramentary (8th century).

During the Middle Ages, the ceremony for the blessing of the palms was most elaborate. The procession began in one church, went to another church in which the palms were blessed and returned to the church where the procession had started for the singing of the liturgy. The principal feature of the liturgy that followed the procession was the chanting by three deacons of the account of the Passion of Christ. Musical settings for the crowd parts were sometimes sung by the choir. Anglicans generally sing the hymn *All glory, laud and honour*, to begin the service, with or without some form of procession.

The liturgy begins with a blessing and procession of palms, but special attention is then given to a lengthy reading of the Passion of Jesus, with parts taken by the priest, lectors and congregation. Given the length and comprehensiveness of the full reading of the Passion, it is common for no sermon then to be preached.

The palms are often taken home by the members of the congregation. Some of them are burned the following year to serve as the ashes for Ash Wednesday. I recall in 2013 needing to burn palms for Ash Wednesday while working on a cruise ship (Fred. Olsen's *Black Watch*), where no such fire was permitted! Fortunately Jennie and I were able to use the outdoor smoking area of the Mission to Seafarers' base in Cape Town harbour for the fire. I was grateful to find additional old palm leaves under a convenient tree!

In the Byzantine liturgy, the Eucharist on Palm Sunday is followed by a procession where the priest carries the icon representing the events being commemorated. In Anglican churches, some of the traditional ceremonies were revived in the 19th century. The majority of Protestant churches, while celebrating the day without ritual ceremonies, give palms increasing prominence.

Palm Sunday is celebrated all around the world in different ways.

In Bulgaria, Palm Sunday is known as *Tsvetnitsa (tsvete, "flower")* or *Vrabnitsa (varba, "willow")*, or Flower's Day. People with flower-related names celebrate this day as their name day.

In the 15th through the 17th centuries in England, Palm Sunday was frequently marked by the burning of Jack-'o'-Lent figures. This was a straw effigy that would be stoned and abused on Ash Wednesday and kept in the parish for burning on Palm Sunday. The symbolism was believed to be a kind of revenge on Judas Iscariot, who had betrayed Christ. The effigy could also have represented the hated figure of Winter, whose destruction prepares the way for Spring.

In Finland, it is popular for children to dress up as Easter witches and go door to door in neighbourhoods and trade decorated pussy willow branches for coins and candy. This is an old Karelian custom called *virpominen*. It is customary for the children to chant, with some variation, "Virvon varvon tuoreeks, terveeks, tulevaks vuodeks, vitsa sulle, palkka mulle!" which translates as "I'm wishing you a fresh, healthy upcoming year, a branch for you, a prize for me!"

In some regions of Germany, long stakes with pussy willow, box and other twigs are taken for the Palm Procession. In some Southern regions, either the priest leads the Palm Procession, riding on a donkey, or a wooden donkey with a figure of Christ is traditionally trundled with the procession of the faithful.

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