On Passion (Palm) Sunday we celebrate the triumphant entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem on his final journey towards the Cross. This is a significant moment in our journey to Easter. Passion (Palm) Sunday is the turning point between Lent and Holy Week. The celebration begins with a Triumphal procession with palms and ends on a solemn note in preparation for Holy Week.

Origins of Passion (Palm) Sunday

One of the earliest accounts of the Lent and Easter liturgies in Jerusalem was written by a woman who travelled to the Holy Land probably in the early fifth century. Scholars call her Egeria and they think she came from France or Spain to make her pilgrimage.

Egeria describes the feast this way:

At one o’clock all of the people go up to Mount Olivet, that is, the Eleona 1, into the church: the bishop is seated, they sing hymns and antiphons appropriate to the day and place, as are the readings. And when it is about three o’clock, they go down singing hymns to . . . the place from which the Lord ascended into heaven, and everyone sits down there, for in the bishop’s presence all the people are ordered to sit down, so that only the deacons remain standing. There hymns and antiphons appropriate to the day and place are sung; similarly readings and prayers are interspersed. When it is about one o’clock, that place in the Gospel is read where infants with palms and branches ran to the Lord, saying, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” (Mtt. 21:9) Immediately the bishop rises with all of the people and then they all walk from there to the summit of Mount Olivet. For all the people walk before the bishop singing hymns and antiphons, always responding: “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.” And whatever children in this place, even those not able to walk, are carried on their parent’s shoulders, all holding branches, some of palm, some of olive; thus the bishop is led in the same way that the Lord once was. And from the height of the mountain all the way to the city, and from there to the Anastasis 2 through the whole city, all go on foot, the matrons as well as the noble men thus lead the bishop, singing responses, going slowly so that the people may not tire. Then by evening they arrive at the Anastasis. When they have arrived there, although it is evening, they nonetheless say the Lucernare, 3 and another prayer is said at the Cross and the people are dismissed. 4

See-the-Holy-Land website has some good photographs of key places in and around Jerusalem.

By the ninth century the procession with palms was used regularly in churches in the western world. The procession always had a triumphal character – it was a celebration of Christ as King. The people gathered outside their towns for the blessing of the palms. The gospel was read, then

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1 The Eleona is the Church of Pater Noster on the Mount of Olives originally built by Constantine.
2 The Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem is also called the Church of the Resurrection (Anastasis in Greek). The church is built over the place which is traditionally identified as Golgotha, or the Hill of Calvary, where Jesus was crucified. The church also covers the spot commonly identified as the place where Jesus was buried and rose from the dead. See http://www.orthodoxwiki.org/Church_of_the_Old_Sepulchre_(Jerusalem)
3 The Lucernare is a lamp-lighting ritual with psalms, prayers and the burning of incense, which was celebrated at sunset on the eve of a feast.
the people processed to the special place where a cross had been set up. Children had a special role to play, as Pierre Jounel describes:

‘School children and choristers spread their cloaks before the cross; others then threw palms and branches on the cloaks; finally, various groups came forward and prostrated themselves as the antiphon Ave, Rex noster (Hail, our King) was sung. The procession then made its way back to the gate of the town, often carrying in triumph the book of the gospels or even the Blessed Sacrament.’\(^5\)

Liturgy of Passion (Palm) Sunday
This feast day is called Passion Sunday and Palm Sunday because a full account of Jesus’ passion and death is read on this day and because the mass begins with a triumphal procession of palms.

(1) Commemoration of the Lord’s Entrance into Jerusalem

**Gathering:**
The parish liturgy usually begins with the people gathering outside the church carrying palm branches or other greenery such as olive branches. A gospel antiphon (or some appropriate song) is sung: ‘Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. King of Israel: Hosanna in the highest’ (Matt 21:9).

**Blessing of Palms:**
The priest reminds us of our Lenten journey and also what we should focus on in Holy Week. Then he blesses the branches of greenery and sprinkles them with holy water.

**Gospel reading:**
In this reading we hear how, a few days before his death, Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey and how the people of the city gave him a kingly welcome. In Year A the story is from Matthew 21:1-11; in Year B Mark 11:1-10 is read; and in Year C we hear Luke 19:28-40.

Procession with Palms
The people enter the church followed by the minister of the word who carries the Book of the Gospels and lastly the priest. During the procession the people sing an appropriate song.

(2) The Mass
The mass follows the usual format, but the readings are especially significant. Here is an overview of the main ideas in the readings.

First reading (Isaiah 50:4-7)
This reading is from one of Isaiah’s Songs of the Suffering Servant. These poignant songs have been interpreted by Christians as prophesies about the coming of Jesus and his passion and death.

Psalm (21:8-9; 17-20; 23-24)
The Psalm response is ‘My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?’ and it evokes the trauma and sadness of Jesus’ suffering and death. Many of the images and ideas in this Psalm were later used by the gospel writers in their accounts of the crucifixion.

Second reading (Philippians 2:6-11)
In this letter to the Philippians, St Paul describes how Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice in becoming human – he ‘emptied himself’ in order to take on the human condition – even that most extreme aspect of humanity, death. Here Paul clearly identifies the dual nature of Jesus as both human and divine.

Gospel – the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Matthew (22:11-54)
The story of the passion begins with Jesus standing before the Roman governor, Pilate, who reluctantly condemns Jesus to death. The reading ends when, after Jesus had died on the Cross, a Roman solider acknowledges that ‘In truth this was a son of God’.

The colour and flavour of Passion (Palm) Sunday
The priest wears red on Passion (Palm) Sunday. Red is the colour of blood and it expresses a heightened emotional state, the passion of suffering and the trauma of the crucifixion. Red vestments are used again on Good Friday and then on Pentecost Sunday, the last day of the Easter Season.

Passion (Palm) Sunday and then . . .
After Passion (Palm) Sunday, Lent continues, but finishes before the mass on Holy Thursday evening. Then we celebrate the three great days in our liturgical calendar - the Easter Triduum: Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday. On Holy Thursday evening we celebrate the Mass of the Lord’s Supper. In line with ancient church tradition, the sacraments are not celebrated on Good Friday or Holy Saturday. However, at 3pm on Good Friday, our celebration of Jesus’ passion is in three parts: Liturgy of the Word, Veneration of the Cross and Holy Communion. Then, on Holy Saturday evening we celebrate the greatest feast of all – the Easter Vigil!
Preparing for Easter

Passion (Palm) Sunday

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Bibliography

