

PALM SUNDAY

Picture your favorite professional athlete, actor, or singer cruising down the main street of your town in a stretch limousine. Can you see the adoring fans cheering, waving banners, jostling to get closer? This is what we hear as we enter the town of Jerusalem with Jesus on Palm Sunday. Think of the movie stars on the red carpet in Hollywood; the Jewish people of Jerusalem lay down palm branches as a carpet. They have high hopes for their “star,” wishing that Jesus would become a powerful king who would free them from their harsh suffering under the Romans. They hope that Jesus will be the promised king who will restore the nation of Israel to its former glory, as it was during the time of Kings David and Solomon.

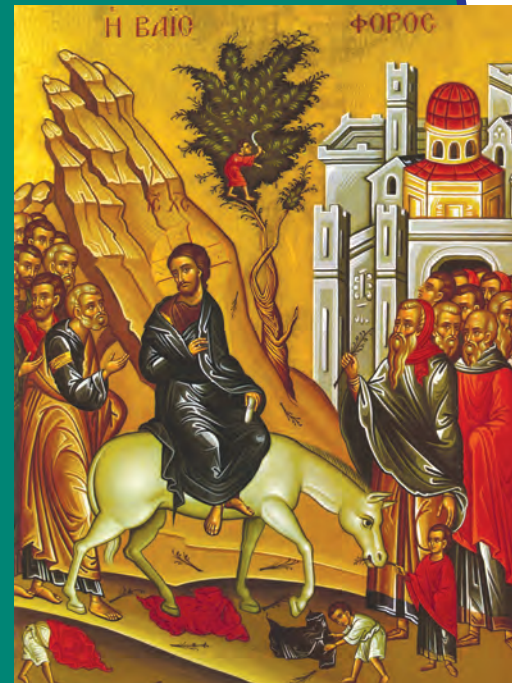
Now picture your celebrity driving an old, dented car instead of waving from a limo. Christ doesn’t have an old car, but He does ride into town the common person’s way: on a donkey. His fans in Jerusalem expected to see their king riding high on a proud stallion. But Jesus chooses to ride a donkey—a humble beast of burden, an animal of peace—to show that the people should not expect an earthly kingdom. His kingdom is, and will be, like nothing on earth.

When we enter

Jesus chooses to ride a humble animal

the church on Palm Sunday, we enter Jerusalem with Christ. And because we enter with Him, we also will “suffer” with Him, and this service begins His suffering and betrayal. To suffer with Him does not mean that we should feel pain. Instead of pain, we suffer with hope for and joy in the coming resurrection, which gives this suffering a purpose and meaning.

If you look around the church, you may notice that it is decorated with palm branches. Each person receives a palm cross at the end of the service. There are many customs, too: some churches will also distribute branches of bay leaves, flowers, or pussy willows. All of these remind us of the people who waved palm branches to welcome Jesus and laid them at His feet as He entered Jerusalem.



Entry into Jerusalem

- Icons frequently use “shorthand” to describe places, events, and ideas. The small group of buildings in background represents the whole city of Jerusalem.
- What are the children in the icon doing? How might they describe Jesus’s entry into the city to their friends?



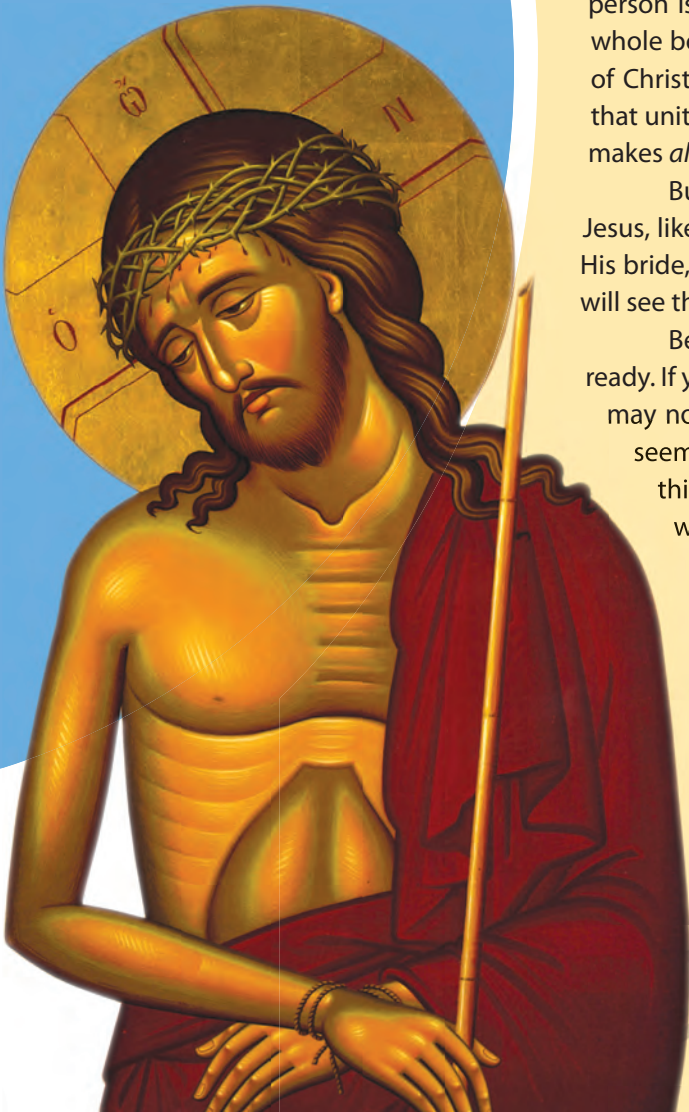
A hymn we sing on both Saturday of Lazarus and Palm Sunday reminds us why we carry palm branches and what the raising of Lazarus means for all of us:

“To confirm the general resurrection before your passion, you resurrected Lazarus from the dead, O Christ our God. Therefore imitating the children, carrying the symbols of victory, we cry out to you the Victor over death: Hosanna in the highest; blessed are you, the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”

What are the Bridegroom Services?

Christ the Bridegroom

- Read Isaiah 53:3–6. How does this passage describe what you see in the icon?
- Some Bridegroom icons have the words “Behold the man!” next to Jesus. Read John 19:1–5 to find out why.



WATCH. GET READY. BE READY.

It should sound to you like something big, something important, is happening, and we had better not miss it. Getting ready for the coming of Jesus Christ is what we should be doing our whole lives. On the first three evenings of Holy Week, we get ready for Christ, who is our Bridegroom. We are reminded of our responsibility to keep our eyes open and on Christ.

When we hear the word “bride,” we imagine a pretty, smiling woman in white. But “bride” has a greater meaning in the Church. We don’t come to the Church to be individual brides. In the Church, no person is alone; each of us is an important part of the whole body. When we come together like this, this body is the “bride of Christ.” The Church, the bride, is preparing for the wedding feast that unites her to Christ and makes her complete. So, uniting to Christ makes *all* of us complete.

But why do we call Jesus a bridegroom? The answer is simple: Jesus, like a bridegroom in a wedding, is willing to give everything for His bride, the people of God, the Church. By the end of Holy Week, we will see that Jesus gives up His life for His followers.

Because the Church is the bride, we each play a part in getting ready. If you have ever seen a bride preparing for her wedding day, you may notice that she is very busy. Her upcoming wedding probably seems to be the only thing on her mind. It may seem like the only thing she talks about. Almost everything she does involves her wedding and her groom.

Like the busy bride, we must keep our Bridegroom, Christ, on our minds as much as we can. If we are busy, we must be busy living a life that brings us closer to Him. We show Jesus our love by preparing for Him. The stories we hear in each of the Bridegroom Services remind us of what this preparation means.

**We show
Jesus our love
by preparing
for Him**

Palm Sunday Evening: The First Bridegroom Service

When we enter the church on the evening of Palm Sunday, we greet the icon of Christ the Bridegroom, which will remain at the front of the church for the three days of Bridegroom Services. It shows us who the Bridegroom is and who we are preparing to meet. How does He look? This is a somber icon, reminding us that we are entering into the harshest days of Jesus Christ's earthly life. The challenges and betrayals will lead to His arrest, trial, and death on a cross.

On Sunday evening, we focus on two stories that connect us to the past (the Old Testament) and the future (our own lives). We remember Joseph the Patriarch, whose story is in the Book of Genesis. We see Joseph as a "prototype" of Jesus Christ, showing the same steadfast love that Jesus Christ offers in His last earthly days. Joseph was innocent and righteous, but his brothers betrayed and mistreated him. He had enough faith that God loved him, that he "reassured and comforted" his brothers (Genesis 50:19–21). We all know how difficult it is to reassure and comfort someone who mistreats us. Joseph offers his brothers the same type of forgiving love that Jesus Christ shows when He asks His Father to forgive those who crucify Him. In the end, God rewards Joseph because forgiving love is the Way. Joseph's story reminds us that our Bridegroom is the one who forgives, loves, and rewards us if we do the same.

During this service, we also hear Christ curse the fig tree. According to the Gospel of Matthew, Christ walked past a fig tree that didn't have any fruit, and He cursed it to never bear figs again. This story is not just about a tree. When the fig tree stands before Christ and gives Him nothing, it symbolizes any person or group of people who does not receive Christ and His teachings. The tree fails to give fruit. Often we as people fail to "bear fruit": we don't live as we should. Each of us needs to care for our soul as if it is a garden, so our faith is *living, breathing, and doing*.

When Christ curses the tree, it withers and dies, showing His divine power over life. Therefore, our Bridegroom is not just sad, as He may appear in His icon; He is triumphant and powerful, as well as loving and forgiving.

Bridegroom Hymn

Behold the Bridegroom
comes in the middle of the
night. Blessed is the servant
whom he shall find watching.
Unworthy is the one whom he
shall find heedless. Beware,
then, O my soul, not to be
borne down with sleep, lest
you be given up to death and
be shut out from the Kingdom.
Wherefore, rouse yourself
crying out: "Holy, holy, holy
are you, our God."

Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts



One part of the Presanctified Liturgy that is longer than it is during other services is the Litany for the Catechumens. Traditionally, Holy Week is a time of intense preparation for catechumens, or learners, who are getting ready to join the Church by receiving the Sacraments of Baptism and Chrismation (anointing with oil) on Pascha. This was especially true during the early centuries of the Church, when many people became Christians as adults rather than as children. Today, catechumens take up their crosses, as shown in the photo, because Jesus commanded it; read Luke 9:23–26.

After completing the prayers for catechumens, however, the priest does something that seems surprising and confusing: he tells them to get out! “All catechumens, depart,” he repeats again and again. The second part of the service, the Liturgy of the Faithful, is intended only for Church members who are ready to receive communion. Don’t be surprised when no one leaves, though: this part of the tradition generally isn’t practiced today.

How many times will you attend a church service this week? In the early days, Christians couldn’t get enough! They came to hear God’s word and share communion as often as they could, even on days when the Church knows that celebrating the Divine Liturgy is too festive for the season. The Divine Liturgy is only for Sundays during Lent because it is such a joyous time of offering gifts to God. But the full celebration is too much of a contrast with the solemn time of fasting and repentance of Great Lent.

Because fasting and the spiritual struggles of Lent are hard work, the people need to be nourished. Therefore, the food from the “banquet” of the Divine Liturgy is also shared during the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts on certain weekday evenings during Great Lent and, depending on the parish’s schedule, on one or more days during the early part of Holy Week. On the Sunday before, the bread that is to be part of the Presanctified service is offered up along with the bread and wine to be used for Holy Communion during the Divine Liturgy. The priest then places a few drops of the consecrated wine onto the bread, and then he places these sanctified gifts in a tabernacle (box) on the altar table until they are needed during the week.

During the Presanctified Liturgy, the priest silently brings out the body and blood of Christ with great reverence. He covers his head with the aer (cloth) to show respect, and all of the people kneel and keep their heads down.