

# Time to Party

Psalm 118: 1, 19 – 29

Matthew 21: 1 – 11

**Purpose:** To encounter the joy of celebration in the Palm Sunday story and to link with liturgical feast days as a foundation for a renewed spirit of celebration in the Church.

Where were you on July 20, 1969? That might seem like a tough question, especially if you were born sometime after that, but I'm sure many folk you will remember where they were and what they were doing on that day and, even if you weren't around for it, there will be a significant other in your life who will have told you about it. That was the day when Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin became the first and second humans to set foot on the surface of the moon.

I was at school. I remember the whole school being assembled into just a few classrooms to watch the great event on television. The powers-that-be in that school hierarchy had decreed that the presence of mere mortals on the moon was a significant event in world history. An unforgettable moment that was worth celebrating.

Cramped with about a hundred other students in a classroom designed for about thirty people, I wondered what the fuss was about. All I wished for on that day was to get outside for a breath of fresh air. Still, perhaps my teachers were right. On that day, a dream came true. When Armstrong and Aldrin planted their feet on the surface of the moon, the whole world paused to reflect on the great achievements of science and technology and the wonder of human ingenuity.

It was worth celebrating! I may not have thought so, but the citizens of New York obviously didn't agree. When the astronauts came back to earth they were given one of the largest ticker tape parades ever. Banners lined the street for miles. Thousands of people cheered and shouted until they could cheer and shout no more. It was a marker point in history and thousands of people could think of just one thing: Let's celebrate. It's party time!

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The first Palm Sunday was a day like that. Jesus, of course, wasn't travelling on the back of a jeep when he made his entrance to Jerusalem. He was sitting on the back of a donkey. In the absence of ticker tape and streamers, in their cloaks and palm branches the assembled crowd was the perfect substitute. So the atmosphere for the arrival of Jesus in Jerusalem had all the buzz and excitement of a ticker tape parade. Imagine the return of the Australian team after a

successful Olympic Game or Queensland after a victorious State of Origin. Then you have the picture of what it is was like that day in the streets of Jerusalem.

People are jumping up and down. They're treading on each other's toes in the crowds, shouting out at the top of their voices until their throats were hoarse and generally having a grand old time celebrating the arrival of Jesus into Jerusalem.

Make no mistake. The coming of Jesus is a fabulous reason for celebration. It was party time in Jerusalem when Jesus came that day sitting on the back of the donkey.

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Party time! What images does that raise for you? Joy and laughter, perhaps; singing and dancing; an opportunity to yarn with family and friends. They say: "Different strokes for different folks," but everyone likes a party. Some folk like a majestic banquet while others prefer a simple meal. There are going away parties that wish us well when we leave on a journey, birthday parties that mark the main moments of our lives. In some cultures, even at times of death with a wake there is a time for a party. The spirit of celebration is so central to human life that even when there seems to be no reason to have one, we'll actually go looking for an excuse.

So this Palm Sunday, I want to remind you that the arrival of Jesus – Jesus' coming into our life and experience – is the best possible excuse for a party. Much better than two men going for a wandering on the surface of the moon. Much better than winning a few gold medals at the Olympics. Even better than a victorious Queensland State of Origin. Yet, one thing we Christians rarely seem to do is seize this best possible excuse to have a party.

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It hasn't always been that way. In fact over the years, Christians have been as good at partying as everyone else. We called them feast days. Easter Sunday was a feast day. So was Pentecost and the Day of Christ the King, the last Sunday of the church year, which is a pretty recent one. There were feast days for saints and feast days to begin the liturgical seasons. These days we have the days, but not the feasts. I want to know: With such good reason to celebrate what happened to the Party?

The famous nineteenth century German philosopher and poet, Friederich Nietzsche announced the death of God in his book "Thus Spake Zarathustra." Why? Well I'm no expert, but I'm told it's because Christianity, as he saw it, lacked joy. They had lost the art of celebration. The Christians that he knew had forgotten how to party.

We Christians claim that we have good news to share, but our actions belie our words. It reminds of the comment of the English humourist, P.G. Wodehouse: “It was one of those parties where you cough twice before you speak and decide not to say it after all.”

I suspect that’s what many people, unused to our ways of doing things in the church, think and feel if they actually come into a church service. We have a seriousness that is alien to them. Quaint customs and rituals, which however full of meaning and power for us, and don’t think I’m knocking them, lack meaning and life for them. To those beyond the church, it looks as though the well of living water has run dry because the church has forgotten how to celebrate. We’ve forgotten how to throw a decent party.

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Now I’m not suggesting that our parties should be like those other parties that people organise. I don’t want Sunday worship to be like Flemington race track on Melbourne Cup day – all froth and bubble and no substance. Nor do I want to bring back the drunken parties of the Corinthian Christians that were attacked by the apostle Paul in the first of his letters to them.

But Christians lay claim to the good news that God wants us and loves us and has acted in Jesus so that we can have an abundant life. That means a double measure of life. Actually a triple measure of life. Actually even more than that we lay claim to abundant life that is eternal.

Nietzsche thought that life should be so good that people would choose to relive it over and over again – with its joys and even its trials. Really, that’s the sort of life that God offers in Jesus. Not just any old life, but the very best of life. With the promise of that sort of life, you would think that we Christians would never stop having parties.

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What would a Christian party be like? Probably an old introvert like me is the last person to give advice on such a matter. But, there are a few things I can say. When Christians party there should be a buzz in the air and life bubbling around us. There should be a bounce in our steps and a song in our hearts, if not actually on our lips. We may want to leap and dance with joy like David when the Ark of the Covenant came to Jerusalem and when we lament for the tragedies of this world there would be real passion and feeling in our weeping. And, yes, there would be weeping because a Christian celebration could never ignore the destructive consequences of evil in the world.

Those who came to share in our party would be caught up in the spirit of celebration just as people in a city get caught up in a ticker parade. They would be captivated by the raw energy and life which would flow from us, around us and within us.

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Bring back the Feast Days I say! Remember that worship is (amongst other things) an opportunity for celebration.

So, this Palm Sunday, as we enter Holy Week, remember, we have something to celebrate. Your king has come to you, humbly mounted on a donkey. It was a great excuse for a ticker tape parade. Jesus entry into our lives and our world always is. So! Let's party!