

All you really wanted to know about Palm Sunday and were afraid to ask

By John Arnott

This past Sunday (March 25) many denominations around the world celebrated Palm or Passion Sunday.

This, like Easter, is a movable celebration that falls the Sunday before Easter and commemorates Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, where branch-waving crowds hailed him as a hero and king, the only time he allowed this to happen.

In the ancient Middle East, it was the custom for people to line the streets and wave branches of trees, especially the fronds of date palms, to welcome home victorious heroes, kings and generals. Jesus chose to ride on a donkey or mule, the beast of burden of the poor, to stress he was not a war general riding in on his charger, but rather a man of peace.

Only in the Gospel of St John is it stated that the branches being waved were palms ? but of course John would have been a witness to the event.

In the early Christian communities, probably from fear of persecution, this event was not publicly marked. However by the third or fourth century AD, when Jerusalem was being rebuilt after its complete destruction by the Romans, Christians in the city under more tolerant Roman rules began holding small outdoor evening processions where participants carried date palm fronds or olive branches to commemorate Jesus' ride. By the fifth century AD, this custom had spread to Constantinople (modern Istanbul in Turkey). And by the seventh century, when Christianity was the major religion of the Mediterranean world, two new traditions had been added, the palms were blessed and processions were now held in the morning. By the 800s, the event had acquired a name Dominica in Palmis or Palm Sunday.

In Rome, the largest procession formed up outside the city walls where the pope celebrated mass, blessed the palms and led the people to his Rome church, St. John the Lateran or St. Peter's, where a second mass was said. Eventually the first mass was dropped, but blessing of the palms remained.

During mediaeval times in some parts of Europe, a straw effigy called Jack O'Lent, representing Judas Iscariot, the disciple who betrayed Jesus, was carried in the procession to be later burned. This had its roots in a pre-Christian ritual where the straw effigy represented hated winter and was burned to welcome spring.

In years past, especially in northern Europe and parts of North America, when it was impossible to get palm branches, the branches of willows, pussy willows, birch or the evergreen yew were substituted and the day was called after whatever branch was used.

Some Christian communities use bouquets of spring flowers and call the day Flower Sunday.