

Sermon preached at OCC – Palm Sunday

Prepare our hearts, O God, to hear your Word and obey your will. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

The Final Lap

Luke 19:28–40

I borrowed today's sermon title from the book *The Final Lap – Navigating the Transitions of Life* by John Wyatt. He compares life to a marathon, full of highs and lows. As we approach different life transitions—like retirement, aging, or even the move from independence to dependence—we enter what Wyatt calls “the final lap.” He invites Christians to reflect on how we live in these seasons with purpose, hope, and joy rather than fear or regret.

That concept got me thinking: what if Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem was his final lap? Today, we'll reflect on Jesus' journey in terms of these laps—looking back on what's come before and what it means for us today. And as we do that, I invite you to consider your own journey: where are you in your own faith race?

The Four Laps of Jesus' Mission

Let's start by breaking Jesus' life and ministry into four laps—four key stages of his race.

Lap One is about identity. In Luke 3 and 4, Jesus is baptized and anointed by the Holy Spirit. He receives divine confirmation: “You are my Son.” From that identity, he launches his mission.

Lap Two is his Galilean ministry (Luke 4:31–9:50). He performs miracles, heals the sick, calls his twelve disciples, feeds the five thousand, and teaches through parables. This is the phase where crowds grow and momentum builds.

Lap Three begins his journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51 onwards). Jesus starts preparing the disciples for what's to come—about suffering, servanthood, and the true cost of discipleship. The tone shifts: urgency increases, and so does the opposition.

And now we reach Lap Four—what we often call Palm Sunday or Passion Week. Jesus enters Jerusalem. The crowd welcomes him like a king, but we know how the week ends: betrayal,

arrest, crucifixion. And yet, God raises him on the third day, culminating his mission with victory over sin and death.

From these four laps, we see four key themes in Jesus' faith journey: identity in God, launching his mission, confronting religious authority, and finally, total obedience—laying down his life for the sake of God's kingdom.

But now let's reflect personally. No matter our physical age, many of us may still be in our first or second spiritual laps. Some may not yet be living out their mission. Some may be facing their own Jerusalem or struggling to obey. So, let's explore two central ideas that can help us locate ourselves: the cross and Jerusalem.

The Cross

The cross is perhaps the most mysterious and challenging symbol in Christianity. Why did the Son of God have to die? What does the cross really mean for us? How did Jesus' death on the cross save us from the eternal death? To explore this, let me reference a scene from the movie *Bruce Almighty*, starring Jim Carrey - (Have you watched it?). Unhappy with his present situation, Bruce Nolan – the protagonist – often complains about God. Finally, God granted him God-like powers for a week. He tries to fix everything in his life - but the one thing he can't do is force *Grace*, the woman he loves, to love him back. In the end, Bruce admits his failure. Now, his last wish is to make sure *Grace* finds a man to make her happy. Bruce lays everything down - his pride, his will, even his life - so that *Grace* might be happy, even if it means losing her. Only then is his life restored.

That's the cross. Jesus lays everything down out of love for the world - even his life. This act of self-emptying love began not just at Calvary but the moment "the Word became flesh." His entry into Jerusalem wasn't a celebration of fame - it was a step toward suffering.

Luke's Gospel doesn't mention palm branches or shouts of "Hosanna."¹ Instead, we find people laying coats down before Jesus. The cheering crowds were the whole multitudes of his disciples. And the donkey wasn't just a means of transport but a symbol of peace and humility.

¹ n Greek, "Hosanna" (Greek: ὡσαννά, hōsanna) means "save, please" or "save now." It is a Greek transliteration of the Hebrew phrase "hôšî'â-nā," which translates to "save, we pray" or "save, please".

And yet, we know that by the end of the week, those cries of joy will turn into shouts for crucifixion.

Jerusalem

So why Jerusalem? Jerusalem was the centre of Jewish religious life, home to the Temple, the heart of worship. But it was also the place where prophets were killed, where power structures resisted God's Kingdom Jesus preached. Jesus enters Jerusalem to do four key things:

1. He makes a public declaration of his identity.
2. He forces the hand of the religious leaders, aligning their timetable with God's.
3. He fulfils prophecy - like Zechariah 9:9,² which speaks of a king riding on a donkey.
4. He shows that the Messiah brings peace, not war.

But Jerusalem isn't just the place where Jesus dies. It's where he rises again. It's where the Church is born at Pentecost. It's where the Gospel begins its global journey.

In this passage, Jesus sends two disciples to untie a colt. When asked why, they simply say, "The Lord needs it." Surprisingly, the owners allow it. In this small exchange, we see a profound truth: Jesus, the Lord – Kyrios - has authority even over human kyrioi, or "lords."

The Final Lap... and a Little Donkey

Let me take you back to the story we shared earlier - about Dan, the smallest donkey. Dan always dreamed of doing something big, and the other donkeys teased him. But because he was small, no one had ever ridden him. And that's precisely why he was chosen. Dan didn't know who Jesus was. He didn't know the significance of the journey. But he carried the King on that final lap. What about us?

The word lap can also mean a circuit - coming full circle. Jesus came to replace the physical Temple with a living one—us, the Church. He began with a word made flesh and ended with the Spirit given to a people. His race made it possible for us to run ours. So, where are you on your journey? Are you still discovering your identity in God? Are you in the middle of your

² Zechariah 9:9 - The Coming Ruler of God's People, Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

mission—wondering what God is calling you to do? Are you confronting resistance—internal or external? Or maybe... you're in your final lap, wondering what it means to finish well?

Whatever stage you're in, may this story remind you the race isn't about speed, status, or strength. It's about surrender. It's about saying yes—even if you're a small donkey with big dreams. Because the Lord may just need you. Let us pray.

May God help us see where we are in our faith race. May we find joy in the journey, courage for the cross, and trust as we follow Jesus into our own Jerusalems. Amen.