

It's that time of year again. Surrounded by crowds of others doing the same thing, you are making your way into the city of Jerusalem. God's city. The place where the temple draws people to itself for worship and celebration and remembrance.

Every year it's the same journey, the same bustling, preparation, and pattern, but every year also has its differences. Different people being met along the way. The weight of another year on your shoulders. The subtle shifts of restlessness of a people tired of living under occupation. But it's always something to be looked forward to, this journey. It marks a high point in the year, and weaves the pattern of life in the ebb and flow of the months.

This year the smells of travellers and food and sweat rose to mingle with the city odours, swirled into the dust kicked up by hundreds and thousands of feet making their way towards their crowded destination. It's taken several days to get this far, the city now within touching distance, and as you walk, shifting the bundle on your back, you join with the crowd in singing the psalms.

Like many people, there are several psalms you know by heart, and words drift up like prayers as hundreds of voices join together. "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures for ever."

Even as you sing, a Roman soldier standing guard along the side of the road, keeping an eye out for unrest, glares as people walk by. It's a volatile time with so many crammed into Jerusalem, every house and resting place overflowing with visitors. There are almost always disturbances of some sort. Every year there's an unspoken whisper of hope, that the Messiah will come and lead everyone in an uprising. Some years there are even people who claim they ARE the messiah, but it's never ended well. Rowdy rebels who get themselves killed. No wonder the Romans are uneasy when the crowds gather for a festival. But can they blame them? What people wouldn't want to be free? You straighten your back and sing a little louder in defiance. "Give thanks to the Lord, his steadfast love endures for ever."

Just then you see something strange. There's a shift in the crowd, and coming up behind you on the road is a man, surrounded with waving palm branches. For some bizarre reason he's riding a donkey. It should look undignified - a full grown man on such a small animal - but he carries himself with a quiet assurance.

The psalm swells and the words rise up around him, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" There's something about his face. He's clearly not a warrior, not someone who will lead an army or an uprising, but for some reason you feel drawn to him. He looks like someone who would really see you for who you were. Someone who would listen to you. Someone who really cared about others.

When the real messiah comes, the priests are supposed to come out of the Temple to greet him, marking him as the one, affirming that the time has arrived. In a wild moment of hope you glance ahead, wondering if the priests are coming, but there isn't anything. Nothing is happening other than the crowds singing and continuing to stream into the already-full city.

The man on his donkey draws closer, and in a moment of impetuous longing you take the cloak from your bundle and lay it on the road in front of him. He's not the messiah, clearly, but for some reason you wish he was, and can't ignore the urge to show respect and honour to this stranger who tugs your heartstrings.

'Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good'.

You wonder what it will be like, when the Messiah comes, when the people are free and the steadfast love of God is shown to the world once again. Then there will be much rejoicing, and they will sing louder than ever. But for now it is time to prepare for the Passover once again, and you turn and set your eyes forward, walking under the arch into Jerusalem.