

# CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

Date:	29 March 2026
Service:	Eucharist, Palm Sunday
Preacher:	The Dean, The Very Revd Dr Edward Dowler

For quite a large part of my ministry, I taught in a theological college, where our job was to train men and women for ordination. One of the privileges of this was to hear the stories of the very interesting people who made up our student body. Early on in their time with us, we used to put the students through an exercise called 'my faith journey' in which we would ask them to recount to their tutor group what had led them to be where they were. Listening to one of these, a particular phrase that he used struck me. This student was recounting his experience of being a pastoral assistant in a parish not too far from here in the diocese of Portsmouth with a worshipping tradition similar to ours here at the Cathedral. He said that he was particularly moved by what happened at Holy Week because, as he put it, 'we didn't just talk about what happened in Holy Week, we actually did it'.

'We didn't just talk about it; we actually did it'. Those words have stuck with me because they encapsulate much of what is important about the services in Holy Week. Whether it's carrying palms on Palm Sunday, washing feet on Maundy Thursday, or coming to the cross on Good Friday or greeting the new light of Easter at the Easter Vigil. In all of these liturgies over the coming week, we won't just be talking about these things but actually doing them. We'll remember that they did happen in the past, but we re-enact them; bring them to life; experience them afresh in the present.

If you follow through the whole sequence – and I encourage everyone to do that – you’ll be able to say, on Palm Sunday I greeted Jesus as he entered Jerusalem; on Maundy Thursday I shared his last supper and prayed with him in the garden; on Friday, I stood by his cross; at Easter, I was there to greet him when he rose. I didn’t just talk about these things; I actually did them.

‘We didn’t just talk about it, we actually did it’ – this phrase also has some wider resonances, when we think about Our Lord himself in the events that we are celebrating this week.

Early in his ministry, Jesus had taught his disciples that they must turn the other cheek, pray for their persecutors and love their enemies. In Holy Week, he himself puts these words into action. He accepts a scourging from the soldiers and prays for his persecutors, saying, ‘Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing’. Similarly, he had taught them that they must take up their cross and follow him. In Holy Week, he himself does takes up the cross and goes to be crucified on Calvary. He had taught them that unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit. On Easter Day, Jesus himself is the grain of wheat who bears fruit by being raised from the dead. There are many more examples, but in Holy Week they all come together: his instructions to us are not just words, but based on his own actions: ‘if I then, your Lord and master have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet’.

And because of this, the New Testament stands in contrast with the vast majority of religious and spiritual books of all kinds which are essentially collections of wise sayings of a learned sage or guru. In the events of this great week, Jesus’s teachings are shown not just to be a collection of wise words, but we see them put into practice. In Holy Week, his teachings come off the page; they are lived out to the full by the one who has said them. He is not a leader who says, ‘do as I say, not as I do’, but one who gives his followers the lead, shows them by his own actions the way that they also should follow.

One could say perhaps that in Holy Week, Jesus's own words become flesh.

And finally, there's a challenge for us in that phrase as well.

This and every Holy Week we will be drawn into the worship, into the liturgical performance in all its extraordinary depth and richness, and, beyond any other time of the Christian year, we will meet Christ in these. But that liturgical performance, crucial though it is, should not be the end, but lead to a further performance that takes place in our hearts and lives. So this Holy Week should enable us to put into action all that we have heard and done and sung about: to serve others more willingly; to follow Jesus more confidently; to love our brothers and sisters more sacrificially; to pray more expectantly; to forgive more readily; to die more hopefully.

And in these ways we will be able to say as we look back upon Holy Week 2026, 'we didn't just talk about it, we actually did it'.