

Why do Christians carry palms on Palm Sunday?

This feast commemorates Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, the week before his Passion and Crucifixion. The Gospels attest that as Jesus entered the city, crowds laid down palm branches and cloaks, as he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. For centuries, Christians have commemorated this feast day (that begins Holy Week) by waving branches of either palm or another local tree, as well as with liturgical processions and other celebrations.

In the U.S. alone, nearly 18,000 Catholic parishes will celebrate Palm Sunday by blessing and distributing palm branches to the faithful. That takes millions of palm leaves each year - and that doesn't include all of the Protestant churches that observe the tradition.

Where do all those palms come from? While many Catholics know the final destination of their palms (e.g., they are burned to become ashes for next year's Ash Wednesday), the origin of the leafy branches is less well known.

The journey from tree to church begins with the harvesters around the world, who cut and prepare the leaves for their role in worship. The work needed to provide palms for Palm Sunday is so immense that it actually constitutes a full-time and year-round job for some farmers and harvesters.

