

The Puzzle of Palm Sunday

Palm Sunday April 9, 2017

Jesus entering Jerusalem slide

Today we celebrate Palm Sunday, and the passage we just heard read to us from the Gospel of Luke reminds us of the familiar story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. We read of the crowds gathered to celebrate the arrival of the man they thought would rescue them from the hated Romans, and John's gospel tells us of the palm branches that the crowd waved or put in his path. But we also know that Palm Sunday marks the beginning of what many Christians call Holy Week, leading up to Good Friday with its remembrance of Jesus' death on the cross. So this story of triumph is followed within a few days by the agony of betrayal and arrest and an excruciating death. So what is going on here? How did a triumphal entry turn into what looks at first sight like a dismal and devastating defeat? Was it all a big mistake? Did the prophet from Galilee misjudge his followers and end up paying for this error with a horrible death and the end of his ministry? Or is there something going on here that revolutionizes human history and gives a new meaning to life? So the title of this message is "The Puzzle of Palm Sunday"

Slide

So I want to try to answer today the questions that thoughtful men and women seeking the truth about Jesus must grapple with. Was his death simply a tragic miscarriage of justice? Was it just the end of a promising ministry? Or did it have eternal significance, and does it still ring out the truth that God exists and that this event was the greatest historic event of all time?

These are important questions, because eternal destinies hang in the balance. If Jesus' death was all a big mistake, then we have nothing to look forward to in the future, and we might as well end up saying with Shakespeare's Macbeth

Slide

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing

But if Jesus' death was part of God's plan, and if it was not the end but in fact just the beginning of something much more glorious, then life is transformed with meaning. So which is it? Was Palm Sunday the biggest mistake of Jesus' life, or was it all part of God's plan to save the world? Our answers to this question are a matter of eternal significance.

To answer these questions we have to zoom out from a closeup look at the events of Palm Sunday to look at the big picture of why it happened, and to do that we need to go back to look at God's reasons for sending Jesus Christ into the world. As we do this we will see that Jesus' death was not only NOT a big mistake, but was in fact the outcome of God's purpose for the world planned from the beginning of time.

This is a subject that theologians have written books about, and I can only give you a sort of Cliff's notes version of the Cliff's notes. To help me keep things straight I have broken this vast topic down into six short points

Slide

1. Christ's death was planned before the dawn of time
2. Christ's death was prefigured by the Jewish passover

3. Christ's death was predicted by the prophets
4. Christ's death was preknown by our Lord
5. Christ's death was provoked by the events of Palm Sunday
6. Christ's death was perfect in what it achieved.

Slide

1. Christ's death was planned before the dawn of time

The first line of evidence is that Jesus Christ's death was not just some awful miscarriage of justice (although it certainly was that) but that it was planned by God from before the creation of the world. In the book of Revelation, 13:8 John writes about

Slide

"the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world"

And when the Apostle Peter preaches to a crowd on the day of Pentecost, he says

Slide

"Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross." Acts 2:22-24

And he continues this theme in his first letter to the churches of Asia. He writes

Slide

1 Peter 1:18-20

For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.

Slide

2. Christ's death was prefigured by the Jewish Passover.

The book of Exodus records the story of how God brought the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. He did this through a series of plagues, ending in the last and worst one when the angel of God went throughout the land and killed the firstborn child in every family. The firstborn in the Israelite homes were spared from death because they were protected by the blood of a lamb that had been killed, and its blood had been spread on the top and the sides of the doorframe of each house.

Slide

"Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it into the blood in the basin and put some of the blood on the top and on both sides of the doorframe. ... When the LORD goes through the land to strike down the Egyptians, he will see the blood on the top and sides of the doorframe and will pass over that doorway, and he will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses and strike you down.

Ex 12:21-23 (NIV)

So the whole point of this is that the death of the lamb saved the life of the Israelite firstborn. Fast forward about 1200 years and we see the same thing happening on Good Friday; the death of Jesus, the Lamb of God, saves the lives of those who put their faith in Him. Let me share just three parallels between the death of Jesus on the cross and the Jewish Passover.

The first one is that the lamb killed at Passover had to be perfect in every way. Jesus, the Lamb of God, was the only man ever to live a perfect life.

The second one is the obvious one that Jesus died at the time of the Jewish Passover. As we shall see, this was not an accident; it was all part of God's plan to make it crystal clear that Jesus was in fact the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. The Passover crowds in Jesus' day were so large that scholars think the Passover lambs were killed over a 2-day period. According to John's gospel Jesus died before the second and probably major Passover celebration, at the exact time of 3:00 pm when the Passover lambs were being sacrificed in the temple. His death was perfectly timed to connect it with the Passover sacrifice.

The third parallel is a simple one. In the original Passover the blood of the lambs were spread on the doorposts and the lintels of the houses; in other words on a vertical piece of wood and a horizontal piece of wood. And when Jesus hung on the cross, his blood from his feet and his lacerated back and head spread over a vertical piece of wood, and his blood from his hands was spread over a horizontal piece of wood.

So the Jewish Passover offers another sign that God had planned Jesus death and set up the original Passover as an explanation of what was to happen hundreds of years later. God could have redeemed his people from Egypt without the ritual of the Passover, but he chose it because of what it prefigured about the death of Jesus.

Slide

3. Christ's death was predicted by the prophets

The Jewish Bible, what we call the Old Testament, is full of prophecies about Jesus. One website lists 353 prophecies from the Old Testament that were fulfilled by Jesus; it would take all year to preach through these taking 7 each week. <http://www.accordingtothescriptures.org/prophecy/353prophecies.html> And about 100 of these prophecies relate directly to Jesus' death and resurrection, so there is no shortage of examples! Let me then just remind you of the most familiar one, from Isaiah 53.

Slide

3 He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.

Like one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

4 Surely he took up our infirmities
and carried our sorrows,
yet we considered him stricken by God,
smitten by him, and afflicted.

5 But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
and by his wounds we are healed.

Slide

6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

7 He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before her shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

Slide

8 By oppression and judgment he was taken away.
And who can speak of his descendants?
For he was cut off from the land of the living;
for the transgression of my people he was stricken.

9 He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
and with the rich in his death,
though he had done no violence,
nor was any deceit in his mouth.

Isa 53:3-9 (NIV)

You cannot have a clearer picture than that of what Jesus suffered for us on the cross!

Slide

4. Christ's death was preknown by our Lord

The only person who was NOT surprised by Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion was Jesus himself. His disciples did not believe it, and Peter even tried to talk him out of what he saw as a terrible idea. The crowd that welcomed him on Palm Sunday obviously had no clue that this was one of the last days they would see him. The Jewish leaders, although they were looking for a way to get rid of Jesus, had no idea that they could do it so quickly and easily until Judas showed up with his offer to betray Jesus.

But Jesus himself knew exactly what was going to happen. On several occasions during his ministry Jesus told his disciples what was going to happen, and one of these was shortly before Palm Sunday:

Slide

Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again."

The disciples did not understand any of this. Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what he was talking about. Luke 18:31-34 (NIV)

So Jesus know what was going to happen to him.

As an aside, what amazing courage this shows! Some of us were brought up on the child's prayer "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon this little child, Pity my simplicity, Suffer me to come to Thee." Yes, Jesus was loving and gracious to children, but he also had a spine of steel and a resolution and determination that puts me to shame. He entered Jerusalem knowing exactly what would happen to him there.

Slide

5. Christ's death was provoked by the events of Palm Sunday

We now come back to our original question. Why did Jesus choose to ride into Jerusalem in this way only a few days before the feast of Passover? After all, this was a very public thing to do, and until this moment he had not sought any sort of publicity. When he healed a blind man in Bethsaida, we read

Slide

Once more Jesus put his hands on the man's eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. Jesus sent him home, saying, "Don't go into the village."

Mark 8:25-26 (NIV)

Slide

And then he raises the daughter of the synagogue ruler Jairus from the dead. What a public relations bonanza that could have been; he could have had people all over the country flocking to follow him! But what does he do? He tells her parents to keep quiet!!

Her parents were astonished, but he ordered them not to tell anyone what had happened.

Slide

Luke 8:56 (NIV)

And then when his disciples finally learn who he is, he tells them to keep quiet about it Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ." Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

Mark 8:27-30 (NIV)

So why this sudden change? Why go public in such a provocative way? It is precisely because the time had now come for Jesus to complete his work on earth by dying on the cross for us and for our salvation. It was the Jewish Passover, and so Jesus chose this time to die to make crystal clear that he was the Lamb of God. By entering Jerusalem in this way he was declaring to all the world that he was the Messiah, the king the Jewish nation had been waiting for. The prophet Zechariah had foretold this event.

Slide

Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion!
Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you,
righteous and having salvation,
gentle and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
Zech 9:9 (NIV)

So when Jesus rode into Jerusalem he was saying “I am the king foretold by Zechariah; I am the one you are waiting for. But the Jewish leaders were not ready for a king; they were too busy keeping their own position by being friendly to the Romans who ruled the country, and they did not want some upstart teacher from Galilee to upset their cozy position. So Jesus, by entering Jerusalem in this way, was essentially signing his own death warrant; he was saying “Here I am; I am the Messiah, the shepherd-king foretold by Zechariah and others, and I am ready to die for the sins of the world.”

I love the Palm Sunday hymn Ride on! ride on in majesty!, because it perfectly captures this truth:

Slide.

Ride on! ride on in majesty!
In lowly pomp ride on to die;
O Christ, thy triumphs now begin
o'er captive death and conquered sin.

Ride on! ride on in majesty!
The angel-squadrons of the sky
look down with sad and wondering eyes
to see the approaching sacrifice.

Ride on! ride on in majesty!
Thy last and fiercest strife is nigh;
the Father on his sapphire throne
expects his own anointed Son.

Ride on! ride on in majesty!
In lowly pomp ride on to die;
bow thy meek head to mortal pain,
then take, O God, thy power, and reign.
Henry Hart Milman (1827)

Slide

6. Christ's death was perfect in what it achieved.

Very briefly, let us note that Jesus death on the cross was the perfect offering for sin, and as a result we can be free from the bondage and the power and the punishment of sin. As Paul wrote to the Church at Corinth:

Slide

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.
2 Cor 5:21 (NIV)

And the writer to the Hebrews writes

Slide

Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he

sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.

Heb 10:11-14 (NIV)

The Episcopal prayer book speaks of Christ's sacrifice as "A full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world."

Slide

Conclusion

Well, you may be saying to yourself, that's all fine and dandy, but what difference does it make? So I want to suggest three lessons we can learn from this story.

Slide

The first lesson is the *Lordship of Jesus*. His death on the cross was not a horrible mistake; it was the completion of his life's work. He came for the express purpose of dying for us, and he was the one making the choice of when and where to die. And as we shall remember next Sunday, his resurrection proves the success of his mission, and tells us that he is now exalted at God's right hand. But you will have to come back next Sunday to get the full picture from Jim Krouscas.

Slide

The second lesson is the *love of God*

The events of Holy Week, from Palm Sunday to Good Friday to Easter Sunday speak to us clearly of the Love of God. God did not spare his only Son from the suffering of death for us and for our salvation.

The Oxford Professor and atheist turned Christian C. S. Lewis puts it this way

Slide

"God, who needs nothing, loves into existence wholly superfluous creatures in order that He may love and perfect them. He creates the universe, already foreseeing - or should we say "seeing"? there are no tenses in God - the buzzing cloud of flies about the cross, the flayed back pressed against the uneven stake, the nails driven through the mesial nerves, the repeated incipient suffocation as the body droops, the repeated torture of back and arms as it is time after time, for breath's sake, hitched up... Herein is love. This is the diagram of Love Himself, the inventor of all loves." C. S. Lewis "The Four Loves"

Slide

The third lesson is that the Love of God and the Lordship of Jesus are not abstract ideas but are eternal truths that demand a response. The question for us is, are we admirers of Jesus, or committed disciples of Him?

The following story illustrates this, and is adapted from a message preached by Chuck Warnock in 2010. Chuck is the pastor of Chatham Baptist Church in Chatham, Virginia, and has written about the April 16 shootings at Virginia Tech among other things.

When Clarence Jordan and others founded Koinonia Farms in Americus, Georgia in 1942, he founded an interracial community that he thought was an authentic expression of the Kingdom of God. It was an experiment in both agriculture and the Gospel, in which whites and blacks worked side-by-side, tilling the fields, harvesting the crops, and sharing life together.

Not everyone in southwest Georgia 75 years ago shared Clarence Jordan's vision of the Kingdom of God. So Koinonia Farms attracted trouble. The farm was shot at by passing cars. Signs and buildings were vandalized. Crosses were burned and Koinonia community members were beaten. Merchants refused to sell supplies to the farm, and eventually, legal troubles mounted for the struggling experiment in Christian love.

Clarence Jordan approached his brother, Robert Jordan, a local Georgia attorney, for help with their legal problems. Robert was an up-and-coming young attorney with political ambitions of his own. He would later serve as a Georgia state senator, and as a justice of the Georgia State Supreme Court.

David Augsburger in his book, *Dissident Discipleship*, captures the scene as the two brothers talked.

Robert had declined to represent Koinonia Farms with this explanation:

Robert: “Clarence, I can’t do that. You know my political aspirations. Why if I represented you, I might lose my job, my house, everything I’ve got.”

Clarence: “We might lose everything, too, Bob.”

Robert: “It’s different for you.”

Clarence: “Why is it different? I remember, it seems to me, that you and I joined the church the same Sunday as boys. I expect when we came forward the preacher asked me about the same question he did you. He asked me, ‘Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior?’ and I said, ‘Yes.’ What did you say?”

Robert: “I follow Jesus, Clarence, up to a point.”

Clarence: “Could that point by any chance be — the cross?”

Robert: “That’s right. I follow him to the cross, but not on the cross. I’m not getting myself crucified.”

Clarence: “Then I don’t believe you’re a disciple. You’re an admirer of Jesus, but not a disciple of his. I think you ought to go back to that church you belong to, and tell them you’re an admirer not a disciple.”

Robert: “Well now, if everyone who felt like I do did that, we wouldn’t have a church, would we?”

Clarence: “The question is, do you have a church?”

And that is the question for us too. Are we admirers of Jesus or disciples?