

BEHOLD, YOUR KING

John 12:12-19

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Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written, "Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!" (Jn. 12:14-15).

“**N**ext year in Jerusalem!” These words from the traditional Jewish Passover express the fervor with which Jews long for their ancestral home. Jerusalem was where the true Passover was celebrated, at the holy temple on Mt. Zion, with the holy Levitical priesthood. There were three festivals at which ancient Jews were expected to be present in Jerusalem: Pentecost, Tabernacles, and Passover. Tabernacles may have been the most festive occasion, being the annual harvest feast. But Passover was the most solemn, remembering the exodus deliverance when the blood of the lamb protected God’s people from the angel of wrath.

Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem for the Passover in his third year of ministry is one of the great, dramatic events of his earthly life. The triumphal entry is one of the few events recorded in all four Gospels. Yet it is probably the most poorly understood. It is marked by a strange departure from Jesus’ usual behavior. Elsewhere Jesus withdraws from public confrontation, as he did immediately after raising Lazarus, since the authorities had published what amounted to an arrest warrant for him. Many think that Jesus now entered with such fanfare as a final appeal for the people to accept him as king. But Jesus entered Jerusalem so publicly not to garner public approval for a secular throne. Instead, because the time had finally come, he was goading the leaders of the Jewish Sanhedrin into acting on their wicked plans. J. C. Ryle explains Jesus intent:

The time had come at last when Christ was to die for the sins of the world. The time had come when the true Passover Lamb was to be slain, when the true blood of atonement was to be shed, when Messiah was to be ‘cut off’ according to prophecy (Dan. 9:26), when the way into the holiest was to be opened by the true High Priest to all mankind. Knowing this, He placed Himself prominently under the notice of the whole Jewish nation... He died in a week when by His remarkable public entry into Jerusalem He had caused the eyes of all Israel to be specially fixed upon Himself.¹

THE GRAND ENTRY

History has known many grand entries: conquerors returning home from war, kings and queens arriving for coronation, and sports and media stars celebrating their triumphs. But none is as remarkable as the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem.

For one thing, it is likely that the assembled crowd was truly vast. The first-century Jewish historian, Josephus, recorded that one census taken at Passover counted 2,700,000 people in the small city. A count of the lambs brought for slaughter numbered 256,500, with one lamb slain for at least ten people present. If those numbers seem hard to believe – and many scholars doubt them – few deny that there would have been at least a million people bursting the streets of Jerusalem.

The name of Jesus would have been on practically everyone’s tongue. One reason was the public notice made by the rulers calling for his arrest (Jn. 11:57). Another reason was the spread of the news from Bethany. Jesus’ friend Lazarus had died. Four days after Lazarus was laid in the tomb, Jesus called him forth from the grave. Numerous witnesses attested to the fact and an even greater number of people had seen Jesus and Lazarus together just the day before Jesus’ entry, at the dinner given in his honor (Jn. 12:9).

Therefore, as Jesus approached Jerusalem on what we remember as Palm Sunday, the effect was explosive: “The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, ‘Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!’” (Jn. 12:12-13).

¹ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 2:365.

John's Gospel is the only record to note the palm branches, so it seems that he wanted to emphasize this feature. As Jesus approached, the people draped the road with their cloaks (see Mt. 21:8) and with palm branches. This is a curious detail, since palms played no role in the Passover feast but rather in the Feast of Tabernacles. Why, then, did the people wave and place palm branches before Jesus?

The answer is that the palm branch had been for the previous two hundred years a general symbol for Jewish nationalism. When Simon Maccabeus drove the Syrians out of Jerusalem and restored the temple a hundred and fifty years earlier, he was heralded with waving palms. During the wars of Jewish rebellion a generation after Jesus, coins were struck by the insurgents with an image of palm branches. The palm was the Jews' emblem for a conqueror, an association they also made with the promised Messiah. William Barclay writes that the Jews who waved these palms

were looking on Jesus as God's Anointed One, the Messiah, the Deliverer, the One who was to come. And there is no doubt that they were looking on Him as the Conqueror. To them it must have been only a matter of time until the trumpets rang out and the call to arms sounded and the Jewish nation swept to its long delayed victory over Rome and over the world.²

This idea is reinforced by the cries lifted up at Jesus' approach: "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!" (Jn. 12:13). "Hosanna!" means "Save us now!" Most significantly, it comes from Psalm 118, a Messianic psalm sung during the Passover feast: "Save us, we pray, O LORD! O LORD, we pray, give us success! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD! We bless you from the house of the LORD" (Ps. 118:25-26). So frequently were these words sung and repeated during the various feasts of Israel that they had become practically the fight song for the Jewish independence party. That this was the spirit of those welcoming Jesus is evident from the fact that they added the words "even the King of Israel!" As Britons hail their monarch with "God Save the King!" and Americans greet their President with "Hail to the Chief," the Jews welcomed Jesus with the "Hosanna" from Psalm 118.

² William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 2:136.

THE KING OF PEACE

People have different mental images of how Jesus responded to this welcome. Those who envision him exulting in the attention, like a modern hero riding through a ticker-tape parade, are clearly wrong. But those who envision a stoic Jesus, passively going his way as if he barely noticed, are also wrong. A key to understanding this event is that Jesus did not begin his entry mounted on a donkey. The other Gospels make it clear that Jesus anticipated what would happen, and had made miraculous provision for an unriden donkey to await him on the Mount of Olives (see Mt. 21:2). But as Jesus arrived in full view of the crowd he was walking. It was only atop the last ridge that he mounted the donkey in a clear symbolic statement. Moving forward, the city itself soon came into his view. Jesus stopped and, Luke tells us, he wept over it, saying, “Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes” (Lk. 19:42), and then Jesus prophesied Jerusalem’s coming destruction (Lk. 19:43-44). This proves that Jesus lamented the palm branches or at least the kind of salvation they proclaimed.

Jesus did present himself as Israel’s true king, but not as the king for whom the people were seeking. This was the provocative point made by the donkey on which he rode. The horse-mounted king came bent on war; the donkey was ridden by a king who came with peace. Therefore the point Jesus made was clear to all. His manner of entry could not have more strongly renounced the Zealots’ militant idea of what the Messiah should be. Jerusalem was offering Jesus the kingship, only a kind of kingship that Jesus pointedly rejected in the manner of his coming. This explains how this crowd that so excitedly welcomed Jesus could call for his crucifixion just days later. Jesus had rejected their offer of a warbound kingship on Palm Sunday; they rejected his kingdom of peace on Good Friday.

John reminds us that Jesus’ entry on a donkey perfectly fulfilled an important Old Testament prophecy. This alone provided a good reason for Jesus to act as he did: the minute fulfillment of so many ancient prophecies is a strong proof of Jesus’ claims. The prophecies foretold the character that the Messiah would exhibit in his coming.

One of the most important was given by the prophet Zechariah about five hundred years before Jesus. John writes that Jesus sat on the donkey “just as it is written, ‘Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!’”(Jn. 12:14-15).

John is referring us to the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9: “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” When New Testament writers cite an Old Testament verse, they normally are referring us to the entire passage in which the verse is found, wanting us to read the verse in its full original context.

Zechariah's prophecy provides a rich understanding of the coming Messiah. It describes the coming king as righteous and having salvation, humble and bringing peace. The next verse continues by foretelling the end of warfare and the bringing of peace to all the nations of the earth: “I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall speak peace to the nations; his rule shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth” (Zech. 9:10). Against the backdrop of this well-known prophecy, we see how strongly Jesus' manner of entry served as a rebuke to Jerusalem's mood. Little did the Jews appreciate that the kind of Messiah they sought was directly contrary to the Savior God had promised to send. What a warning this is to us, as Christians and churches, that our spiritual agenda be the one that God has actually mandated in his Word!

The Jews in Zechariah's time did not have a king, their last monarch having perished in the Babylonian captivity. So in that kingless era, God's people were told to look for the coming of the ruler whom God would send, one who fits and fulfills the Messianic expectation of the Old Testament. Here is a king who is just and having salvation, and who comes in meekness and affliction. David Baron writes:

This prophecy was intended to introduce, in contrast to earthly warfare and kingly triumph, another Kingdom, of which the just King would be the Prince of Peace, who was meek and lowly in His Advent, who would speak peace to the heathen, and whose sway would yet extend to earth's utmost bounds... If ever was a true picture of the Messiah-King and His Kingdom, it is this: and if ever Israel was to have a Messiah, or the world

a Saviour, He must be such as is described in this prophecy – not merely in the letter, but in the spirit of it.³

The only person in all of history who fits this description is the Lord Jesus Christ. Here is a wonderful portrayal of his person, the Messiah who comes as king. First, Jesus is righteous. Many commentators think this simply states that his reign will be just, but this must also touch upon him as a person, that he is himself righteous. Isaiah 42:1 said of him: “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations.” The One who establishes righteousness is the one who is pleasing in God’s sight, who is himself righteous in all his ways. Jesus accomplished perfect righteousness as the personal qualification for serving as God’s righteous king.

Secondly, God’s coming king is “gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” The donkey was a royal mount in Israel’s earlier days. The judges, as well as David rode a donkey, and Solomon, the king of peace, rode one in his coronation ceremony. This, therefore, is a sign of divine royalty, characterized by humility and gentleness of spirit. Comparing this to the war horses ridden by worldly kings, Thomas McComiskey writes:

The donkey stands out... as a deliberate rejection of this symbol of arrogant trust in human might, expressing subservience to the sovereignty of God. Jerusalem’s king is of humble mien, yet victorious, and so it has always been that the church does not effectively spread the gospel by sword or by arrogance, but by mirroring the humble spirit of its king and savior.⁴

Such is the entrance of this Messianic king, one who is righteous, with salvation, but who comes not in worldly might but in the weakness of the cross. One of our Palm Sunday hymns expresses it well:

Ride on, ride on in majesty! In lowly pomp ride on to die;
O Christ, your triumphs now begin o’er captive death and conquered sin.
Ride on, ride on in majesty! In lowly pomp ride on to die;
Bow your meek head to mortal pain, then take, O God, your pow’r and reign.

³ David Baron, *The Visions and Prophecies of Zechariah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1918), 303-304.

⁴ Thomas E. McComiskey, *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 3:1166.

Just as these words rebuke the ancient Jews who rejected Jesus for refusing their worldly agenda, they also rebuke us today if we are seeking a militant savior in Christ. How easy it is for Christians to get so caught up in the so-called Culture War – the contest today between policies promoting Christian values or those of pagan unbelief – that we mount a warhorse to ride against our sinful neighbors. But the Jesus who rode into Jerusalem on a humble donkey would have his followers likewise minister his truth in loving humility. As Christians face an increasingly hostile secular society, we must resist the temptation to wage war, but instead we must represent the Prince of Peace in his truth and love. As we interact with unbelieving neighbors – including even such flagrant culture war enemies as abortionists, homosexuals, and evolution proponents – we must reach out to them with the same loving desire for their salvation that drove Jesus into Jerusalem to take up the cross.

We should meditate upon the contrast between the person of Christ and that of every earthly king. Whereas earthly kings rule for their own riches and glory, Christ rules for our salvation. Earthly kings reign from above the people, in haughty power, but this king condescends to dwell among us. Jonathan Edwards writes, “His condescension is great enough to become their friend, to become their companion, to unite their souls to Him in spiritual marriage... Yea, it is great enough to abase Himself yet lower for them, even to expose Himself to shame and spitting; yea, to yield up Himself to an ignominious death for them.”⁵

In Jesus’ life and ministry we find one example of humble meekness after another. Arthur Pink says, “Notice it in the men selected by Him to be His ambassadors: He chose not the wise, the learned, the great, the noble, but poor fishermen for the most part. Witness it in the company He kept: He sought not the rich and renowned, but was ‘the Friend of publicans and sinners.’ See it in the miracles He performed: again and again He enjoined the healed to go and tell no man what had been done for them. Behold it in the unobtrusiveness of His service: unlike the hypocrites who sounded a trumpet before them, He sought not the limelight, shunned advertising, and disdained

⁵ Jonathan Edwards: *Altogether Lovely: Jonathan Edwards on the Glory and Excellency of Christ*, (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1997), 18-19.

popularity... When He, in fulfillment of prophecy, presented Himself to Israel as their King, He entered Jerusalem 'lowly, and riding upon an ass.'"⁶

A king like this is worth shouting over, which is why the prophet enjoins the people: "Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you." On the day her king did come, when Jesus rode in on the back of a donkey, this prophecy was fulfilled. Luke tells us, "The whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices... 'Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!' 'Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!'" Some of the Pharisees said to Jesus, 'Teacher, rebuke your disciples!' 'I tell you,' he replied, 'if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out'" (Lk. 19:37-40).

PERSPECTIVES ON THE COMING KING

John concludes his account of Jesus' triumphal entry by showing the different perspectives held by the different participants. This is something John likes to do, knowing how helpful it is for placing ourselves inside the story.

First, John tells us of Jesus' closest disciples, those who had long followed him and had close access to him: "His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him" (Jn. 12:16). The ignorance of the disciples is remarkable, since Jesus had so clearly told them what was about to happen. Matthew tells us that on the brink of Jesus' entry, he said to his disciples: "See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day" (Mt. 20:18-19).

This shows that Jesus was far from a passive victim of the events about to unfold. He was the Lord of them and everything that happened was by God's sovereign intention. But despite Jesus' clear

⁶ Arthur W. Pink: *Comfort for Christians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993) p. 75.

statements, the disciples were puzzled by the triumphal entry, just as they were by the cross. Only later, when they had been enlightened by the Holy Spirit, did they understand the meaning of Jesus' ministry.

Christians today are not much different from the disciples. Most of us have little idea how God's saving kingdom is being extended and served through the affairs of our lives. Indeed, one of the joys of heaven will be learning how God used something we said or some encouragement we gave a struggling sinner that made all the difference in their lives. J. C. Ryle observes, "We shall then discern with wonder and amazement the full meaning of many a thing in which we were unconscious agents during our lives."⁷ Indeed, much of the excitement that gains the attention of the world will be shown to be of little significance, while much unnoticed but faithful Christian worship and service will be seen in its glorious importance. Realizing this, we should make it our business simply to serve the Lord in keeping with his Word and in reliance on his sovereign grace. Whether we are employed in the workplace, raising children in the home, mingling with neighbors in society, or joining together in the church, Jesus calls us to a purposeful life of humble obedience, sacrificial love, and gospel witness.

Secondly, there were many who hailed Jesus because they had either witnessed or heard of his great miracle in raising Lazarus from the grave. The relationship between Lazarus's resurrection and the triumphal entry is seldom appreciated. Yet it is obvious that many, if not most, of the crowd drew the wrong conclusion. They saw in Jesus a power that they hoped to harness to their own purposes. Instead, they should have recognized his deity and simply come to worship and serve him. This is a perennial problem in the world: a desire to receive the blessings Christ might offer, without first embracing the true purpose of his saving grace. This prompts me to ask what you see in Jesus. Do you see only a power to help in your worldly pursuit of security and success? Or do you hear his call to humbly come, confessing your sins, finding forgiveness through his blood, and serving him in humble, holy faith?

⁷ Ryle, *John*, 2:372.

The crown that Jesus came to wear was not a crown of gold but of thorns. The throne he came to ascend was a cross. Jesus says to all who would seek his blessings: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it” (Lk. 9:23-24). Unless we are willing to meet Jesus at the cross, finding our life not only in his death, but in our own death to sin and self, then we are rejecting Jesus as he really has come.

Lastly, John presents the perspective of the Pharisees. They said to one another: “You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him” (Jn. 12:19). As always, Jesus has mastered the situation. One of his main purposes in the triumphal entry was to force the hand of those who sought to kill him. Unnerved by Jesus’ apparent popularity, the religious leaders were primed to accept Judas’s offer of betrayal. But they were playing Jesus’ game all along.

Even their concluding remark, the final word on Jesus’ dramatic entry into Jerusalem, is made to serve the glory of Christ. They complained, “The whole world has gone after him.” How profoundly have these words come true. Jesus had not come to rescue a puny nation tucked in a corner of the world. Rather, he had come to rescue his people from their sins in every tribe and nation throughout the globe. That we are gathered together today in his name is proof of his success. For as Zechariah prophesied, “Behold, your king is coming to you... and he shall speak peace to the nations; his rule shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth” (Zech. 9:9-10).

Jesus is not finished. When he returns in the glory of his kingdom, when all who reject him are judged and all sin is put away in hell, then Jesus will look upon a whole world that he has saved. For the king is coming again, and the Book of Revelation depicts him riding then not a donkey but a horse for war. And when he has conquered and judged all that stands against him, then there will be peace forevermore. “Behold, I am coming soon,” Jesus declares in the last chapter of the Bible. “Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book” (Rev. 22:7).