

John 12:12 – 19 Hail the conquering King!

The kind of welcome a person receives says a lot doesn't it. I still remember Saturday afternoon wrestling on ITV with Big Daddy and Giant Haystacks where one would be cheered and the other booed as they entered the ring. Of course that was more pantomime than sport, but in the political arena the size and passion of crowds greeting new prime ministers or presidents shines a light on their popularity. That's why the Donald was so keen to claim huge numbers on inauguration day and why he allegedly he has been paying for supporters to come to his recent rallies. It's also why conversely the Royal Family can be so confident of their place in the hearts of the nation right now. There's no need to exaggerate the numbers turning out for royal occasions because often the crowds are beyond counting. The size of a crowd and the warmth of their welcome says a lot about how people feel about the one making the grand entrance.

Throughout the Gospels there are a number of times when Jesus had been welcomed enthusiastically into towns or villages, but they had never been anything quite like this. And coming when he did, where he did and how he did was hugely significant.

So this morning we are going to look at the context of the welcome, the manner of welcome, the significance of the donkey and the gripes of the Pharisees.

So firstly then, the **context of the welcome**:

If you've got your Bibles open you'll see in verse 12 that it begins with '*the next day*'. If you can look back to the start of chapter 12, you'll see what that refers to. Jesus had been to a feast in the village of Bethany just outside Jerusalem. Nothing unusual in that, except that during the meal Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, had anointed him expensive perfume in an act of love and devotion which looked towards his death on the cross. That act of worship had caused a great stir and a number of interesting comments which we don't have time to discuss this morning. But that is why Jesus is in the area and why there is no long journey into the city.

But to understand the immediate context we need to look a few days further back when Jesus had raised Lazarus to life. That's probably why they held the dinner in Jesus' honour and why so many people wanted to herald the arrival of Jesus into the city. Jesus was no longer simply a travelling teacher and miracle worker from Galilee, he had brought back from the dead a local man from just up the road. No wonder the crowds came out to greet him.

Of course the other thing that is important here is that these events took place just a few days before Passover. Passover was, and is, the most important celebration in the Jewish calendar. It's a day when the Jews remember God's rescue of their forefathers from slavery in Egypt. It's a day of grateful thanks and rejoicing. But at the time of Jesus it had an added poignancy as God's people looked for the coming of the Messiah who would bring them complete rescue.

You see although the Jews were living in the land God had given them they were not ruling themselves. The Romans were in charge. The Jews had some semblance of independent government, but it was a puppet regime with limited powers and their kings and rulers only maintained their positions as long as they pleased their Roman overlords.

Now apart from the Channel Islands Britain hasn't been under enemy occupation for many centuries, but of course many countries in Europe have. And there are always various ways of responding to that situation. Do you give in and cosy up to your new rulers? That's how the Sadducees had reacted. Do you

tolerate your occupiers and try to work alongside them whilst at the same time standing up for the rights of your people, as the Pharisees did, fearing what would happen to the country and the temple if there was an open revolt? Or do you refuse to submit and actively plot rebellion as zealots tried to do? All those political questions and the worry, particularly from the Pharisees and the Sadducees, about what would happen if Jesus were to lead an open revolt against Rome, were all part of the religious and political context in which this event takes place.

What's more there was hardly room to move in the city. The Jewish historian Josephus reports crowds in the region of 2.7 million attended the Passover celebrations in the years before the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, and that would not have included foreigners in the city or those unable to take part. And even if he has over estimated the numbers, you can imagine how packed the city and the surrounding countryside would have been. And when religious emotions are running high, when the political landscape is difficult and when a figure of hope emerges speaking with great wisdom and working miracles of great power, even raising the dead to life again, perhaps you can start to appreciate how hopes and dreams and rumours and plots can all be quickly fermented.

That's the context of this passage, so it's no wonder that secondly, **the manner of the welcome** was so extraordinary and packed full of explosive symbolism.

The other gospel writers have much longer accounts than John, but they all record huge crowds waving palm branches and with words of welcome on their lips. And the combined symbolism of the palm branches and what the crowd say is extraordinary, but let's start with the palm branches.

Palm branches do have a place within Jewish celebrations, but it isn't here at Passover. Palm branches were traditionally used at the festival of booths some six months earlier, but that isn't what they are pointing to here.

In the times between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament the nation state of Israel was overrun by foreign powers. But in 141 BC Simon the Maccabee drove the Syrian forces out of Jerusalem and for a while at least Israel enjoyed self rule. And when the battle was over how was Simon greeted by the people? He was greeted with music and the waving of palm branches.

And over the years palm branches had come to be a symbol of a nationalist hope that a messianic liberator was arriving on the scene. And that is how the crowds view Jesus. They are not waving palm branches because they are the first thing to hand. They are waving palm branches because they think that Jesus, with his power to heal the sick and raise the dead, is just the kind of man to bring them freedom from Roman rule. They are welcoming Jesus in as the promised Messiah!

And the symbolism of the palm branches is matched by the words that they use. They cry "*Hosanna!*" Now by the time of Jesus the word Hosanna had come to be used as a general exclamation of praise for somebody, but fundamentally it is a word which means save or "*give salvation now.*" And those kinds of thoughts are obviously at the forefront of their mind because verse 13 goes on to tell us that they welcomed Jesus with cries of "*blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!*" And "*blessed is the King of Israel!*" By the time of Jesus Psalm 118 had come to be understood in messianic terms – that is that the one who comes in the Psalm is the Messiah. So here, the crowds don't simply pronounce a blessing in the name of the Lord on the one who comes; they pronounce a blessing on the one who comes *in the name of the Lord*. As far as the crowds are concerned, their long awaited and long hoped-for King is coming into

Jerusalem which means that their rescue and redemption are just around the corner. That's why they are out in force to give him a right royal welcome.

I hope you can see how the context of the event, both recent events and the political situation have combined together at the time of Passover, a time of celebrating God's salvation and rescue, to lead the people down this route in their thinking. But not everything is as it seems, which is why we going to spend just a few moments mulling over **the significance of the donkey**.

In Roman times when a military campaign was over the victorious general might be granted a Triumph. This was a parade – sometimes lasting 2 or three days – where the troops, the captured slaves and the booty would be paraded into Rome accompanied by all the senators in the regalia with the honoured general, wearing a crown of laurel and an all-purple, gold-embroidered triumphal toga, riding in a four-horse chariot and looking like a sun of the gods. But Jesus didn't come on a great chariot or on a mighty warhorse; he came riding, as it says in verse 15, on a donkey's colt – that means a young donkey.

Sometimes the decisions we make have no symbolic meaning at all, but other times there is huge symbolism embedded in those choices. For example, wearing a white poppy instead of a red poppy or standing or sitting when the monarch enters a room. And that is certainly the case here. To see turn back in your Bibles to Zechariah chapter 9 verse 9, you'll find it on page 955, if you're looking at a church Bible, and we'll see where this quote comes from.

Perhaps the first thing you'll notice is that the quote in John 12 is not exact, and that is often the case when New Testament writers are pointing back to something in the Old Testament. But the point in sending people back to the Old Testament is that they will not just see the verse but see the wider context that the quote is pointing to.

And it's clear that John has got the sense of that verse pretty well hasn't he. He hasn't quoted the whole passage, but he is clearly telling the people of God, those living in Jerusalem, daughter Zion, that when their King comes into Jerusalem he will be seated on a donkey's colt. That's how they will recognise him. And the extra information Zechariah gives deepens our understanding of the significance of riding in to the city on a donkey and what kind of Messiah he will be.

The crowd at the time may have been desperate for a military Saviour, one who would overthrow the Romans, but the King in Zechariah chapter 9 isn't like that at all. He doesn't come in pomp and majesty, with power and might and an overwhelming show of force, he comes righteous and victorious and lowly. In fact as verse 10 makes clear, war and political conquest isn't on his agenda. His aim is to destroy the weapons of war and to proclaim peace to the nations. Neither is his desire just for the nation of Israel, because the rule of this lowly King, the one riding on the foal of a donkey, will extend from sea to sea and from the river Euphrates to the ends of the earth. The kingdom Jesus is going to build is a universal kingdom of peace, of freedom, and of righteousness.

So can you see the clash between that huge vision and the limited understanding that the crowds had on that day? They were after a national saviour, but the plans of Jesus were far, far greater.

What's interesting, if you turn back to John chapter 12, is that even the disciples of Jesus didn't understand the significance of the donkey. At least not until after Jesus was glorified; and by that John means Jesus' death and resurrection. Perhaps the disciples thought a donkey was an odd choice but this was Jesus and they obviously didn't query it. Perhaps they still, like the crowd, expected to be a political Messiah, freeing the people from Roman oppression. Either way, it's only later, perhaps after the Spirit came at Pentecost,

that they were able to look back and see the amazing ways in which God's Word pointed to this truth and made it clear, if only they had eyes to see, what kind of a Messiah Jesus was and what kind of a kingdom he had come to build.

Of course they weren't the only ones to miss out on the significance of the donkey. **The gripes of the Pharisees** show us that they didn't get the point either. They were doing their best to maintain the spiritual life of the nation in the face of Roman rule and waiting for God's miraculous deliverance, and they didn't want any upstart preacher from Galilee rocking the boat and bringing the wrath of the Roman Empire down on Jerusalem.

Now John doesn't give us a lot of details here but this brief sentence does show us how their antipathy was developing. Back in chapter 11 verse 57 they had issued an arrest warrant for Jesus but they hadn't managed fulfil it yet. And now they see the whole world going after him they throw up their hands and say: *"This is getting us nowhere!"* Their plans to get rid of Jesus and to maintain the delicate status quo are coming to nothing.

It's not clear in this passage but their reaction hints that more drastic action will be needed. And that is what we see isn't it over the next few chapters as they plot and bribe and eventually arrange for the death of the Palm Sunday King.

One final point before I finish – did you notice the irony in their words: *"Look how the whole world has gone after him!"* Of course from their perspective they are probably just exaggerating, using this expression to mean that Jesus' popularity seems to be spreading across the whole city. But in John's gospel when he uses the word 'world' there is very often a literal implication in his mind. For example, in John 3:16 when Jesus says that God so loved the world, it is clear that Jesus is on an international mission, something which is hinted at in the next few verses when some Greeks come to seek out Jesus for themselves.

The Pharisees might not have known it, and they certainly weren't expecting it or encouraging it, but their words pointed to the ultimate victory of Jesus. The walk to the cross may have looked like the wrong path to a terrible defeat, but the resurrection of Jesus, his glorious ascension and the promise that one day he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead are reminders that one day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Now I know this is a very familiar story, one that you have probably heard many, many times before. But God's word is living and active, and like a many-faceted diamond we always see something new in it every time we read. So I wonder what struck you from what we've looked at today. In our Lent groups over the coming week we are going to look more closely at this passage and discuss some of its implications, but let me leave you with one question to mull over as I close today: What kind of Messiah are you looking for?

The Jews, most of them at least, were looking for a political hero, someone to get rid of the Romans and establish Israel as strong national state once more. They wanted to return to the glories of the past under David and Solomon. But what about you? What kind of Messiah are you looking for? Are you looking for a Messiah to make your life just a little bit easier? Are you after a Messiah who will hear your prayers and bring health back to your body, togetherness back to your family or depth back to your bank account? What kind of a Messiah are you looking for? What do you want from Jesus?

Very often we want to put Jesus in a box and impose our expectations or our hopes and dreams on him, but it just won't do. The plans of Jesus are far greater, far longer lasting, far wider and far more glorious

than we can possibly dream or imagine. And if we are to be part of that future and to be a part of his Kingdom we need to take him as he is and not as we want him to be.

So perhaps it's time to examine your hopes for Jesus. As we walk towards the cross this Lent, looking at these events in the life of Jesus, we will see that he is on a mission of cosmic importance, and one that deals with our greatest need and draws us into a kingdom of hope and joy and peace and purpose, not just in this life, but for all eternity.

That is the kingdom of the Palm Sunday King. That is the mission of the Palm Sunday King. So I want to ask you, is that what you are hoping for? Is that what you are singing or praying or palm waving for? Of course we can and should bring all our fears and hopes and requests to God and in his love and mercy the Lord does hear our prayers and he does answer according to his purposes and our ultimate good, but if our vision of God's work is simply that he makes this world a little better then we have misunderstood who Jesus is and what he came to do.

The context and events of that first Palm Sunday should challenge our thinking about what kind of Messiah Jesus is and how we should respond to him. So let's receive him as he is and not as we want him to be: and let's respond in repentance and faith in the one who gave his life for us that we might be part of his eternal kingdom of righteousness and peace. Amen.