

John 12:12-16

Introduction

Over the next week, we're going to be following the events of Easter as they're recorded for us in John's Gospel. And I do hope that you can come to the various services we've got planned over the next few days. Today, we're celebrating Palm Sunday. And we've got the apostle John to thank for that. The name 'Palm Sunday' comes from these verses that were just read for us. It's only here, in John's Gospel, that we're told that the crowds were waving palm branches as they went out to meet Jesus.

And it's a significant detail. By this time in history, the palm branch was the national symbol of Israel. We know that because it appears on coins from that period. Here are three Jewish coins, with the image of a palm tree. Here's a Roman coin that was produced to celebrate the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70AD. Again, it has the image of a palm tree. The palm was the emblem of Israel.

So, to wave palm branches was a great display of national pride. We might compare it to the crowds waving the union flag at the Last Night of the Proms. Or perhaps, more accurately, we might compare it to a crowd at a far-right rally, waving the St George's Cross as they march down the street. That might be more like what we're to have in mind as we read of Palm Sunday. The crowd is welcoming Jesus to Jerusalem as their long-awaited King in an outpouring of nationalistic zeal.

But John tells us that they don't understand what's going on. He tells us explicitly in verse 16 that the disciples don't understand what Jesus is doing. And if the disciples don't understand, we can be sure that the people in the crowd don't understand either. They don't understand the kind of king Jesus is. And they don't understand the kind of salvation they need. So that's what we're going to think about in the next twenty minutes or so. Because that's what we need to understand as we read these verses.

So, our first heading is: The kind of king Jesus is.

The kind of king Jesus is

Please look again at verse 12 onwards.

The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, 'Hosanna!' 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!' 'Blessed is the king of Israel!'

Jesus found a donkey and sat upon it, as it is written:

'Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion; see your king is coming seated on a donkey's colt.'

At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realise that these things had been written about him and that these things had been done to him.

Up to now, Jesus has generally shrunk from publicity. He hasn't sought out great crowds. In fact, he's gone out of his way to avoid them. But now, very dramatically, he draws all attention to himself. He's doing so deliberately. His entrance to Jerusalem is a very public and unmistakeable claim to royalty.

So, as the crowd of pilgrims comes out to meet him, waving their palm branches and enthusiastically welcoming him as their king, he accepts their praises. He doesn't shrink away. He doesn't hide himself. He accepts the title they want to give him: '**Hosanna!**' they cry, which means, 'Save us!' '**Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!**' '**Blessed is the king of Israel.**'

That much they *do* understand; that Jesus is entering Jerusalem as God's Saviour King. Yet they get it so wrong. They welcome him as a warrior king. That's what they want. They want a liberator who will take them to war with their Roman oppressors. They want a strong military figure, who will lead them to a great and glorious victory by taking up arms against the Romans and driving them out.

But Jesus enters Jerusalem as a different kind of king altogether. And that's what his actions reveal when we reflect on them in the light of scripture, as the apostle John does here. Verse 14: **Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it, as it is written, 'Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt.'**

As Jesus climbs onto a donkey and rides it into Jerusalem, he is deliberately, and self-consciously, fulfilling the words of the prophet Zechariah, spoken hundreds of years earlier. As Zechariah spoke of this day, centuries before, he said: '**Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.**' (Zechariah 9:9)

The donkey was associated with humility and gentleness. And although John doesn't record it for us, Zechariah goes on: **He will proclaim peace to the nations.**

Jesus enters Jerusalem, not as a warrior king, riding a warhorse, but as the Prince of Peace, riding a humble donkey. Of course, the cheering crowd don't understand the symbolism. Even his closest friends, his disciples, don't get the symbolism of it. John says, in verse 16: **At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realise that these things had been written about him and that they had been done to him.**

It would only be much later, after his death on the cross, that the disciples would look back and make sense of what had happened. Only then would they understand the kind of king Jesus is. His victory wouldn't be won by *overcoming* the Romans. It would be won through

his death *at the hands of* the Romans. It wouldn't be won through military power but through apparent weakness and failure. But no-one understood that as he rode into Jerusalem.

As the crowds welcomed Jesus as their long-awaited King, the Messiah, he knew that he would disappoint them. And we need to understand the kind of king Jesus is otherwise he will disappoint us too. We're unlikely to look to Jesus as a military leader, who will lead us into battle, today – at least, not in this country. But we can easily have wrong expectations of him in other ways.

If we think that he will bring us riches and prosperity, as *some* claim, he will disappoint us. In fact, if we follow Jesus, we are likely to be less wealthy than we might have been otherwise.

If we think that he will make our lives easier or more comfortable, as is *often* thought, we may well find that he disappoints us. In many ways, following him is likely to make our lives harder and more complicated.

And if we think that following him will bring us healing and good health, as we might hope, then we may end up feeling as though he's let us down.

We need to understand the kind of king Jesus is. But to understand that we must understand the kind of salvation we need. And that's our next heading.

The kind of salvation we need

The cry of the crowd reveals *their* hopes of what Jesus would do for them.

Look again at verse 13.

They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, 'Hosanna!'

'Hosanna!' literally means 'Save us!' or 'Bring salvation!'.

That's why they call him blessed. **'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!'**
'Blessed is the king of Israel.'

They understand that he's come to save them. But they've failed to understand the kind of salvation they need.

As Jesus rode forward, seated on a donkey, he was heading not into battle with the Romans but to his death on the cross. And that would be incomprehensible to the Jewish mind. A Messiah who died on a cross made no sense at all. But if we pay attention to the timing, we *can* make sense of it. John tells us that all this happened at the time of **the festival**, meaning the Passover festival.

The Passover happened once a year. It was a festival that celebrated the decisive moment in the rescue of God's people from slavery in Egypt, an event which we call the Exodus. God had already sent a series of plagues on the land, but Pharaoh had hardened his heart and refused to let the people go. He was stubborn and unmoving. So, the final and decisive plague was the plague on the firstborn. Because of Pharaoh's stubbornness, God would pass through Egypt in judgement and every firstborn son in the land would die. But God told the Israelites how to be safe on that day. They were to sacrifice a lamb as a substitute and paint its blood on their doorways. When God saw the blood of the lamb, he would pass over their homes, and they would be spared. That's what they did. And the next day, Pharaoh let them go free. So, at the Passover festival each year, lambs were sacrificed to commemorate that great rescue.

What the crowds can't see, who have come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, is that Jesus is the ultimate Passover lamb. He is going to the cross as a substitute, to die in the place of his people, to save them and set them free.

We'll think a bit more about the link to the Passover on Good Friday, when Jesus finally reaches his goal. But the point for now, is that as the crowds welcome Jesus to Jerusalem, they fail to understand the kind of salvation they need. It isn't salvation from the Romans. It's salvation from the consequences of their sin. The rescue they need isn't primarily a physical one but a spiritual one. And it's the same for all of us.

We all sin. One day we will all face God's judgement because of our sin. And on that day the sentence we each deserve will be death. But Jesus died in our place as our substitute, so that we might live. He didn't come to rescue us from poverty or hardship or disease. He didn't come for our prosperity or comfort or health. He didn't come to give us a perfect life now. He came to rescue us from the consequences of sin, so that we can enjoy life as it's meant to be in eternity. That's what we need to understand.

On the whole, people today still like the idea of Jesus. We like the idea of a kind, gentle man, who went around doing good. We like his love and compassion. We like the stories of the miracles he did. Generally speaking, we like his morality and the things he said. But what we don't like is the idea of the cross. We don't like the idea that Jesus had to die on the cross to save us from our sins... because that says something about us, that we find offensive. It says that you and I are sinners and that we're in need of rescue.

And what's more, having Jesus as our king doesn't just mean accepting his rescue. Jesus said that if we would have him as our king, then we too must take up our cross and follow him. Just as he died for us, so we must die to our old way of life and start living for him. Just as he endured mockery and humiliation and suffering for us, so we must be prepared to endure the same for him.

Jesus didn't come to satisfy our desire for ease and comfort and pleasure. He came to save us from the consequences of our sin. And it wasn't ego that propelled him to the cross. Nor was it a death wish or suicidal tendencies. It was love.

As he rides into Jerusalem, he's fixing his eyes on his destination: the cross. And that's where our eyes should be fixed.

This week, as we remember and celebrate the events of Easter, we need to fix our eyes on the cross. The whole of the Christian life is to be lived with our eyes fixed on the cross of Christ. It's there we find assurance that our sin has been dealt with once and for all. And it's there that we find the answers to some of our most basic questions.

Do you doubt how deeply loved you are? Fix your eyes on the cross and see Jesus willingly lay down his life out of his great love for you.

Do you doubt how precious you are to God? Fix your eyes on the cross and see the Saviour of the world pour out his blood, as your ransom, so that you might be called God child.

Do you need assurance of your salvation? Fix your eyes on the cross of Christ, see the victory he won, over sin, the world, and the devil, and know how secure you are in his hands.

As Jesus rides into Jerusalem, and as we celebrate the events of Easter this week, we need to fix our eyes on his destination.

Then we will rightly proclaim, **'Hosanna!'** **'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!'** **'Blessed is the king of Israel!'** And we will delight in his cross.

As the old hymn says:

*I'll cherish the old rugged cross,
till my trophies at last I lay down;
I will cling to the old rugged cross,
and exchange it some day for a crown.*

Let's pray.

Loving Father, thank you for Jesus. Thank you that he came as our King, to lay down his life, so that we might live. This Easter, please help us to see the kind of king he is and our need of the rescue he won. Please draw us to him in love and faith. And teach us what it means to follow him all our days. In his name we pray. Amen.