

4.2.23 Palm Sunday Sometimes, Understanding Comes Later John 12.12-24

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Several noteworthy events in Jesus' life and ministry are mentioned in all four of the Gospels and Jesus' final entry into Jerusalem is one of them. It's important to remember that each of the four evangelists is more like a painter than a photographer, using their unique perspective, brush strokes, and colors to present Jesus in the light of their own particular view. I've had the blessing of traveling with groups from church in Greece, Italy, and France and in churches and museums all across Europe, one can see Jesus and the Biblical story portrayed through many centuries in quite diverse ways on canvas, in glass, in wood, metal, and stone. Today in the church lobby, you can see some pieces of collage art Ellen Summey created based on each of the I am sayings of Jesus in John's Gospel. They reflect her response to the themes we've explored. In the same way, each of the four gospels has unique details about Jesus' coming into Jerusalem that relate to their telling of the story of Jesus. In John which was the last Gospel to be written, the tone is triumphant (12:12-24, NRSV).

"The next day the great crowd that had come to the festival heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches **of palm trees** and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord— **the King of Israel!**" Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it; as it is written: "Do not be afraid, daughter of Zion. Look, **your king is coming**, sitting on a donkey's colt!"

His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, **then they remembered** that these things had been written of him and had been done to him. So the crowd that had been with him when **he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead** continued to testify. It was also because they heard that he had performed this sign that the crowd went to meet him. The Pharisees then said to one another, "You see, you can do nothing. Look, **the world** has gone after him!"

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some **Greeks**. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "**Sir, we wish**

to see Jesus.” Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for **the Son of Man** to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; **but if it dies, it bears much fruit.**”

On Palm Sunday, people perceive Jesus in different ways and how they see him reveals a great deal about them – whether it’s individuals in the crowd, his disciples, the Pharisees, the Greeks or even you and me. Some are ecstatic, some are puzzled, some are angry, some are curious. When you look at Jesus, what do you see? A Man, a Rabbi, the Turning Point of History, the Light of the Gentiles, the King of Kings, the Son of Man, the True Image of God, The Crucified One, the Prince of Peace? What you see when you look at Jesus may reveal more about you than about Jesus and this is important because what you see when you look at Jesus is life changing. What you see in life – when you look at other people, events, the world, or even Jesus is greatly shaped by your own perspective and your previously held beliefs and often says more about you than what you’re looking at. We see this in the four Gospels.

The significance and meaning of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem is understood differently in each of the four gospels. This may be in part because events tend to grow grander as time passes, but also because, as John notes (12:16), the disciples only came to recognize how significant some events were with the perspective of time and subsequent events. **Sometimes, understanding comes later.** If you look back at your own life, there are moments that you can now recognize were life altering, but you may not have known it immediately or in the moment. When I knocked on the door of Jill Wertz’s dorm room at Colby College in April of 1985 to ask if she’d like to go for a walk, neither of us could have known at that moment that our lives would never be the same. Looking back now, it’s clear. We all have moments like that in our lives and you can think of some for yourself. Sometimes, understanding comes later. According to John, it was only looking backward after the experience of the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the giving of the Holy Spirit that the disciples were able to truly comprehend who Jesus was, what he had done, and what it all meant.

In a good novel or movie, if you read it a second time or watch it a second time you'll notice all kinds of connections, hints, and allusions that you didn't pick up the first time because you didn't know how the story ended and you didn't know exactly what it was all about. With the benefit of hindsight, you understand more fully. This is not only true for novels and films it's also true in understanding who Jesus is.

Today is the beginning of what Christians call Holy Week. The Gospel of John gives so much importance to Holy Week that **almost half of the Fourth Gospel, chapters 12-21 deals just with the events of this week and the days immediately following.** The first significant and unique aspect of John's presentation of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is **the context – it occurs after his greatest sign – raising Lazarus after Lazarus had been dead four days.** This caused many people to believe in Jesus (11:45) and since it happened shortly before the celebration of Passover there was a great deal of talk and excitement. Folks wanted to see Lazarus and Jesus (12:9-10) which put Lazarus' life in danger as well as Jesus'.

John's gospel reverses the sequence of the other Gospels, which say that Jesus sent his disciples to get a donkey for him, and after he began riding the crowd met him on the road (see Matthew 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-10, Luke 19:28-38) In John, the crowd **hails Jesus as king** and then Jesus, to show what kind of king he was, himself finds a young donkey and (12:14) and begins to ride it – a way of dramatizing his fulfillment of the scripture in **Zechariah 9:9-10.** "Rejoice greatly daughter of Zion! **Shout daughter of Jerusalem! See your king comes** to you, **righteous and having salvation, lowly and riding a donkey**, on a colt a foal of a donkey. I will take away **the chariots** from Ephraim, and **the warhorses** from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. **He will proclaim peace to the nations.** His rule will extend from sea to sea."

Kings interested in power and war rode on horses and in chariots to intimidate, dominate, and impose their will on others. Jesus, the king of peace rode a young donkey. Jesus was intentional about how he presented himself on Palm Sunday. Riding a young donkey into the political powder keg that was Jerusalem a city occupied by the Romans and teeming with perhaps 600,000 Jewish pilgrims who came to observe Passover and who longed for freedom from Rome, Jesus knew he was putting his life at

risk. He was offending those who wanted him to lead an armed revolt to oust the enemy. Try to imagine how many people were convinced that overthrowing and defeating Rome was the only way to “take our nation back for God.” Then, in that context, you have this peasant from a backwater town gaining incredible popularity among the people, especially the poor and the marginalized, preaching a message of nonviolence, forgiveness of sins, loving your enemies, and bringing compassion to the most vulnerable. Instead of building a militia, armed to the teeth, this "Messiah" called fishermen, Roman tax collectors, women, and even children to follow him. Instead of riding into Jerusalem on a warhorse leading a brigade, with his sword soaked with Roman blood, Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. As Jesus rode into the city, people were shouting Hosanna (see Psalm 118.25) which seems to be a plea in Hebrew meaning “Save Now!” and, “Blessed is **the King of Israel.**” Their view of Jesus was inaccurate and too small, and we can be guilty of that too if we’re not careful.

Of the four gospels, John is the only one that specifically mentions branches of **palm** trees. The waving of palm branches is significant, because this is what was done when the great war heroes the Maccabees had recaptured Jerusalem in the second century B.C. Some people wanted to see Jesus as a conquering hero like Simon Maccabee, but Jesus’ choice of ride and the Scriptural allusion pointed to something else—a king of peace and non-violence, a kingdom where self-sacrificial suffering and death on a cross and not the killing of enemies was the means of salvation and redemption. Jesus didn’t come to meet the people’s expectations; he came to meet their needs in a way they didn’t fully understand. The crowds were crying out for a particular kind of political liberation, but Jesus had another idea in mind of what made for peace in the face of humanity’s violent madness. The enemy was not Romans or Greeks, or foreigners. The enemy lurked within the hearts of every person—it’s called sin.

By coming to Jerusalem as he did, Jesus is demonstrating on the first Palm Sunday that his glory is not found in pleasing people or fulfilling nationalistic hopes. Jesus’ glorification is accomplished by dying on the cross rather than receiving praise from the crowd, it’s by surrendering his will to God, not imposing his will on others. Jesus’ power didn’t come from people, but from God whose love is shown supremely in

Jesus' death on the cross. John tells us a lot about who Jesus is as the bread of life, the light of the world, the gate, the good shepherd, the resurrection and the life, the way the truth and the life and the vine, but he tells us we can't fully know who Jesus is except in the light of the crucifixion and resurrection.

A final unique aspect of John's Palm Sunday description is verse 16, "**His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.**" **Sometimes, understanding comes later.** On Palm Sunday Jesus announced that the time had come for him to be glorified, but in the manner of a seed falling to the earth and dying (12:23-24). The Jewish pilgrims in Jerusalem were hoping for a king for their nation, John presents **Jesus as the king of all nations.** As Jesus approached Jerusalem on a donkey with the crowd waving palms around him, the Pharisees lamented, "You see, you can do nothing. Look, **the world** has gone after him!" While no one wants to think that they're like the Pharisees today, they represent those who are so fixed on the past and tradition and what was, that they can't see the new thing God is doing. They're not open or curious because they're so certain they're right and everyone else is wrong. Their spiritual descendants can still be found among some people who call themselves Christians today.

John immediately follows the cry of the Pharisees with the statement that "among those who went up to worship at the feast were some **Greeks**" (12:19-20). The Greeks represent Gentile interest in Jesus, and they arrive at precisely the moment when the whole "world" was going after Jesus. The Greeks didn't get to see Jesus. Instead, they approached Philip, the disciple who bore the name of Greek hero Alexander the Great's father. Philip came from Bethsaida on the boundary between Galilee and the surrounding regions (12:21-22). The Greeks looked for help from the person they felt most comfortable approaching, who they thought was most likely to have something in common with them. Who might that be for you? Who in your circle of relationship might want or need to see Jesus and you might be the best person to show or tell them?

Philip shared their request with Jesus, who said that the arrival of the Greeks signaled the hour of his glorification when he would be lifted up in death to draw "**all**

people” to himself (12:23, 32-33). The sign above the cross on Good Friday proclaimed Jesus’ kingship in Greek and Latin as well as Hebrew (19:20), affirming the significance of his death for both Jews and Gentiles. Although the Greeks in chapter 12 didn’t get to see Jesus before he was lifted up, the Fourth Gospel looks beyond the death and resurrection to the time when Greeks would be drawn to Jesus by the work of disciples like Philip (17:18-21). Today people will be drawn to Jesus by people like you.

For John, Jesus’ crucifixion will reveal the glory of God by displaying the depths of God’s love for the world. The weapon Jesus will wield during his passion will not be a sword like the one Peter used (18:10, 36). In Jesus’ passion, the power of God will cast out the ruler of the world **by using divine love as a weapon against demonic hatred, divine truth against the world’s falsehood, and the power of life as the force that overcomes death**. Jesus dealt with sin and evil not by returning violence for violence, for he’d warned that those who live by the sword die by the sword. On the cross Jesus even prayed for his tormentors saying, “Father forgive them, they know not what they do.” Jesus overcame evil with good, and he calls us to do the same.

When you look at Jesus, what do you see? How you answer that question is life altering. Are you seeing him clearly and correctly? Or are you seeing him as you want him to be? Or to fit your desires? He isn’t a nationalistic king. His movement is about the kingdom of God, not about any one nation. It’s about power that’s displayed not by force, domination, control, or violence, that’s not how Jesus acts, but by love, sacrifice, humility, service, kindness, and compassion. Those who see Jesus for who he is, join him in turning the world upside down by surrendering their will to God’s and joining Jesus in the way of self-sacrificing love. I hope you are or will be with Jesus on that transforming journey.

Prayer: Loving God, you’re full of tenderness and compassion, slow to anger, rich in mercy, always ready to forgive. Grant us grace to see Jesus for who he truly is, to renounce all evil and to cling to Christ, that in every way we may prove to be your loving children through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection:

1. Have you ever looked closely at the four Gospels accounts of Palm Sunday to notice what is unique in each? The details of each shed light on the perspective of each gospel. Here are the references: Matthew 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-10, Luke 19:28-38, John 12:12-19. Read them and make a list of what they have in common, what is unique to each, and what you notice?
2. How hard do you think it was for Jesus to come to Jerusalem knowing there were people who wanted to kill him, yet feeling he needed to in order to be obedient to God's will?
3. Can you recall a time when you felt that you knew what God wanted you to do, what the right thing was to do, but you found it difficult to do it? What happened?
4. What are some of the different ways people are looking at Jesus in John 12:12-24? What are they seeing? How do they perceive him?
5. If someone who didn't know or follow Jesus asked you to tell them who he is, what would you say?
6. How does the way you see Jesus impact how you live your life on a daily basis? What difference does it make?