

Palm Sunday

Today is Palm Sunday, a week before Easter Sunday! But before we look at Palm Sunday, or the Triumphal Entry, I want to go back in time a little, and look at Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem, which begins quite a while before the day he actually arrives. Tracing the steps of Jesus' journey gives us a little more context to understand the type of crowd that was with Jesus, and the crowd is one of the themes that seems important on Palm Sunday.

It appears that Jesus began the journey from somewhere near the Sea of Galilee. In Luke 9, Jesus is rejected in a Samaritan village, then travels along the border between Samaria and Galilee, and finally through Jericho and Bethany before arriving at Jerusalem. The decision to go to Jerusalem feels heavy, and Jesus reminds his disciples often that he is going there to suffer, to die, and to be raised to life. In Luke 9:51, Jesus is described as resolutely turning his face towards Jerusalem and walking that way. Just before Jesus arrived in Jericho (a long 1 day walk away from Jerusalem) Jesus tells his disciples, *"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"* (Luke 18:31).

Can you imagine carrying the knowledge that you are walking towards your imminent torture and death? Jesus knows that each step he takes is a step closer to the cross, yet he keeps walking. And the disciples don't understand Jesus' talk about dying. There is a sense of confusion and gloom in this journey. Certainly, no one seems to expect a grand reception at Jerusalem.

Also noteworthy, is that Jesus is not walking alone, nor is he just with his favorite disciples. He is walking with crowds of people, patiently taking moments to teach, answer questions, tell parables, and heal the sick. When Jesus reaches Jericho, he meets Zaccheus and saves him, illustrating the fact that He *"came to seek and save what was lost"* (Luke 19:10). Day by day, the people following Jesus see the sick healed, the blind receive sight, and sinners forgiven and saved. I can only imagine the crowd growing larger, more excited, and expectant each day they travel with Jesus, as they watch lives being changed before their eyes.

John writes that 6 days before the Passover, Jesus arrived in Bethany. This would be the Friday prior to Palm Sunday. This is significant because just one chapter earlier in John's gospel, we read about Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead in Bethany. John tells us that Jesus did not arrive in time to save Lazarus from dying. Jesus arrived after Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days. Interestingly, this means that a large crowd of people from Jerusalem had gathered in Bethany to comfort Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha. This large crowd witnessed Jesus

bringing Lazarus back to life, and many in this crowd put their faith in Jesus because of this miracle. Now that Jesus has returned to Bethany, a dinner is given in Jesus' honor. There, Mary anoints Jesus' feet with a pound of precious perfume. I wonder if anyone noticed the irony that Jesus told Mary she had rightly anointed him for the day of his burial, as they feasted and celebrated the un-burying of Lazarus?

It seems likely that Jesus stayed another night in Bethany to rest on the Sabbath (Saturday), but while Jesus waits in Bethany, a large crowd of people gathered once again, to see both Jesus and Lazarus, probably including many of the original crowd who witnessed the miracle.

Now we finally get to Palm Sunday itself. Jesus begins the day walking to Jerusalem from Bethany on Sunday morning. He already has a large crowd with him- the crowd that wanted to see Lazarus and Jesus. But now another crowd forms- people who had come to Jerusalem for the Feast hear that Jesus is on his way, and they go out from Jerusalem to meet him. When Jesus gets to the Mount of Olives, he stops and asks two of his disciples (we don't know which two) to go ahead of him into a village. He describes how they will find a donkey and its colt. Jesus asks the disciples to go and bring the donkey's colt to him. The disciples find everything as Jesus said it would be, and return with the donkey's colt. Once the donkey's colt is with Jesus, the disciples throw their cloaks over it and Jesus gets on to ride it down the road to Jerusalem. All around, people take the cue and throw their cloaks and cut palm branches to place on the road to celebrate Jesus and his miracles, shouting, *"Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"*

The crowd is behind and before Jesus, and as they get closer to Jerusalem, the crowd only swells. This procession was so large and noisy, that the whole city of Jerusalem knew about it, and it's possible that hundreds of thousands of people were in the city at this time, due to the Passover. Jesus enters Jerusalem late in the day, goes into the temple, where the crowd and chorus of praises continues to follow him. Though Matthew and Luke make it sound like Jesus immediately cleared the temple, Mark gives us an extra piece of the timeline, and lets us know he actually just looked around, and then went back to Bethany to spend the night. So, we will cover the clearing of the temple tomorrow.

There is a lot to ponder about Palm Sunday, but I want to consider two things- the crowd, and the donkey's colt. There's power in a crowd the size of which was following Jesus into Jerusalem. If you've ever been in a stadium full of thousands of people cheering for a sports team or singing a song with your favorite music star, you have experienced the power of a crowd like the one that was with Jesus. A crowd like this can even be dangerous. Governments get nervous when crowds like this form to protest, and they send officers for crowd control. Sometimes people are trampled in crowds like this. The Pharisees are nervous about the power of this crowd. They have been waiting for days for Jesus to show up particularly so that they

could kill him, but this crowd scares them, and they wait. Also, this crowd is shouting praises to God, and calling Jesus the “Son of David.” Up until this point in his ministry, Jesus has generally discouraged anyone from voicing who he is, or how great he is. Here Jesus is finally allowing the crowd to burst forth with the praises they have wanted to bestow on Jesus all this time. Jesus says that if the people were to stop singing these praises, even “the stones will cry out.” It’s a spontaneous, yet God ordained, fulfillment of prophecy- a hugely weighty moment. It must have seemed to the disciples that maybe everything was going to turn out well, that Jesus was finally being recognized and celebrated for being their long-awaited Messiah. Do they dare hope that maybe he wasn’t going to die after all?

Jesus could have harnessed the power of this crowd to overthrow the Roman government, or to be crowned as a national or political king, but instead, Jesus requested to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey’s colt. I have to wonder if the crowd was confused or were they stirred up by the sight of a potential king riding a donkey’s colt, as they remembered Zechariah 9:9-10, written hundreds of years before this day?

“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. I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the war-horses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.”

Whether or not the crowd remembered these verses, we are not told. We are told by John, that the disciples did not catch the reference and significance of the donkey’s colt until after the resurrection. But can now see that the verses from Zechariah 9 give us amazing insight into this historical moment, not just of Jesus’ purpose for riding into Jerusalem, but insight into God’s heart. Jesus was coming to Jerusalem as a king, righteous and having salvation. Wouldn’t such a king ride a mighty war horse? No, instead this prophecy shows us that Jesus is a gentle, peaceful king, as indicated by riding into Jerusalem on a foal of a donkey. Even though he is surrounded by a powerful crowd who could have turned him into a warrior-king, Jesus rides a symbol of peace into the city that will soon murder him. Despite the joyful crowd, Jesus is keenly aware of how his offer of peace will be spurned, and his willingness to suffer will be taken advantage of in Jerusalem. Despite the joyful crowd, Luke tells us that Jesus wept as he caught his first glimpse of the city. He says, *“If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace – but now it is hidden from your eyes”* (Luke 19:42). What kind of king weeps for his lost city when he knows that they will kill him in a few days? Only an extraordinarily good, gentle, and humble king, with a heart for the his lost children would do that.

I used to think that Palm Sunday was all about the joyful crowd, but now I think that maybe the donkey's colt is more important. Jesus was on his way to the cross, where he would break the "battle bow" of death, and bring "peace to the nations." Riding the donkey's colt was a sign of peace, not to Jerusalem alone, but to all the nations. But the peace would come at such a cost to him. No other king in history could ever have won this battle for peace. Only Jesus, the Son of God, had the power to perfectly obey God's Law for us, and then humble himself unto death for us. But he won that peace for us, as evidenced by that donkey's colt, and that peace is freely offered now to all who believe in Him.

Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!

Hosanna in the highest!

Extra Reading: Zechariah 9:9-13, Matthew 21:1-11, Mark 11:1-11, Luke 19:28-44, John 12:12-19