

John 12:12-19
“Drawn to the King”
Palm Sunday (A)

April 2, 2023
Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, West Salem, Wisc.
Pastor Peter Adelsen

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Who doesn't enjoy a parade? For me, I always look forward to watching the Rose Parade each year. Each float is so beautiful and unique. Some are large. Some are small. Some barely make it under bridges and around turns. From the spectacle of the petal-covered floats to the marching bands from all around the world, it is quite a parade. There is nothing like it.

We have parades for holidays, such as New Years with the Rose Parade, but we have also become accustomed to victory parades. We celebrate teams that win championships. We also celebrate people, such as hometown soldiers who return from serving in war time.

In today's Gospel reading, we have another parade. Now, the crowds don't throw ticker tape, or receive candy from those walking in the parade, but they wave palms, just as we did as we began today's service. The parade recorded by John didn't have marching bands, but the people along the parade route were chanting psalm choruses. And the honoree of that parade was not riding an antique convertible, but on the back of a donkey.

This was a parade unlike any other. It was a parade fit for a king – in fact, for the King! But Jesus is a King who isn't what the crowds expect. Yet, the crowds appear to glorify this King in the procession. But this is just the start of a weeklong procession that will ultimately lead to the King's suffering and death – and ultimately to His fullest glorification. Christ's glorified procession into Jerusalem led to His ultimate glorification on the cross.

In the ancient world, processions and parades served to glorify rulers and generals. Typically, the ruler would enter a city welcomed by adoring multitudes, while riding his stately white horse and flanked by his generals. The crowds would welcome their ruler with shouts of cheers and songs of praise. They would throw flowers and leafy branches before his path. They reach out their hands in hopes of touching this man as they consider to be godlike. Indeed, such processions in the ancient world served to glorify rulers and their generals.

The Palm Sunday crowd appears to offer a similar glorification of Jesus. The news of the raising of Lazarus only further increased the fervor. *“This man raised to life a man who once was dead! We must see this man!”*

As Jesus entered Jerusalem, He was greeted as a king. Large crowds welcomed Him as they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him as they cried out, *“Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!”* (John 12:13).

The question is, what sort of a king does this crowd believe Jesus to be?

Palm branches are an expression of nationalistic homage to royalty. Does the crowd understand Jesus to be a conqueror or liberator of the Jews? Palm fronds became a national symbol of Judea, appearing on the coins minted by the Jewish nationalists during war with Rome. So, it appears that the crowd may understand Jesus as the one who will achieve their nationalistic hope of liberation from the Romans.

After all, Jesus has raised Lazarus from the dead. He has healed a man born blind. He healed lepers. If Jesus can perform those miracles, why couldn't he also liberate the Jewish people from Roman occupation?

So, the people cry out: “Hosanna!” Now, this plea was originally a plea for salvation. But over time, that cry of “Hosanna!” had become a calling of praise and acclaim for the conquering hero. So, in the chant of “Hosanna,” there was certainly a messianic expectation placed upon Jesus.

So, the crowd is certainly proclaiming Jesus as a messiah figure, but it appears that they see Jesus as assuming the posture of a Davidic king. And this is on purpose. All that led to this procession was mysterious to Christ's disciples. He gave orders that struck His disciples as strange and puzzling. They were to go into a village just ahead to find a donkey and its colt tied together. Plus, the owner of the donkey and its colt was willing to let the animals go. All very mysterious. At the word of the disciples, *“The Lord needs them,”* they received the donkey and its colt.

The disciples brought the donkey and the colt, placed their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them (Matthew 21:7). They weren't sure which animal Jesus would ride, so they placed cloaks on both of them. Jesus then decided to ride the young colt, which no one had ever ridden (Luke 19:30; Mark 11:2). Upon that young donkey, Jesus would ride on into Jerusalem.

Now, this is significant. First, Jesus identifies Himself as one of the royal line of David. The kings of Judah rode donkeys as a hallmark of their descent from King David. For example, in 1 Kings (1:33-34, 38), Solomon was demonstrated to be the heir to the throne by being seated on David's donkey. So, by the crowd shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they had the right understanding.

But there is more. Second, Jesus identifies Himself as one who comes in peace. A warlike king or a conqueror would most likely ride on a stallion – a stately white horse. So, a king or any other important person who enters a city on a donkey indicates that he has come for peaceful purposes. And, third, John here identifies this with the fulfillment of a prophecy regarding the Messiah: "***Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt***" (Zechariah 9:9; John 12:15).

These huge crowds glorify Jesus by welcoming Him into the capital city. They are awed by His miraculous healing power. Among the crowds, the Pharisees begin to realize that Jesus' popularity is threatening their political power, so they say to one another, "***Look, the world has gone after Him***" (John 12:19). So, they begin scheming to find any way to eliminate Him.

Even with the large crowds, the people shouting, chanting, and praising Jesus still don't know who He really is. It seems that so many misunderstand Christ's mission, for they expect Him to be a military leader. They believe Jesus will use His power to remove the Romans. And even those closest to Jesus misunderstand His mission. For they expect Jesus to be an earthly ruler.

We, too, often misunderstand Christ's mission. We want Jesus to serve our self-determined needs and wants. You may desire Jesus to be your personal mascot who will always cheer you on. He will never talk about hell and damnation. In fact, He will never condemn, correct, or criticize you. He is an all-around nice guy who encourages you in every pursuit.

You may see Jesus as just one option among many. Or, as a man who dispenses health, wealth, and success.

I'd say that the American idea of Jesus is that He is an all-around nice guy who hung out with sinners, so He must be fine with sin. But the reality is that He was with sinners, because everyone else but Him was a sinner. And Jesus never said remain in your sin. Instead, He said, "***Go and sin no more.***" He always called for repentance.

So, Jesus' procession into Jerusalem ultimately leads to His ultimate glorification, not in the Palm Sunday parade, but through crucifixion on Good Friday. You see, Jesus identifies His glorification with His death. He says, "*The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.*" ... "*When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself*" (John 12:23, 32). This glorification through suffering and death is a paradox that the world cannot understand, but it is revealed to us by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus' death is His most glorious moment because it is the accomplishment of His mission to redeem sinners, you and me. This was the plan from the beginning. The crowds may not have understood it then, but in time they would understand God's plan of salvation.

It could only be Jesus' death and bodily resurrection that would fulfill God's plan of salvation. The salvation plan is that the very Son of God would bear the curse of sin so that all sinners are forgiven. It is only through Christ's sacrifice being lifted up from the earth that all humanity would be restored to God.

Through Christ alone, we are reconciled to God. Because of this grace, we glorify the Crucified One as our ultimate King.

Christ's disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified on the cross, they understood how Jesus fulfilled all that the prophets said. They understood Christ's true glory.

So, just as the world was drawn to Christ at his Palm Sunday procession, even more so will it be drawn to Him at His glorification on the cross! Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +