

## **“Taking Jesus Seriously”**

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Text: Matthew John 12:12-19, 21: 12 - 17

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So many things can be said about the triumphal entry of Palm Sunday. But the thing that is most clear is this: Jesus knew exactly who he was and exactly what he was doing. Three years of ministry had set the stage for this moment, building a powder keg for this moment. Then, just before Palm Sunday, Jesus raised Lazarus from the grave. Word of that miracle ran like wildfire through the short distance from Bethany to Jerusalem. John’s gospel makes it clear that Jesus appreciated in advance that this one fantastic miracle would set off the dramatic chain of events to come. And it did. The crowds turned out Palm Sunday because of that miracle, to see that miracle worker. But what they saw that day was far beyond anything they could have anticipated. Raising Lazarus from the dead lit the fuse on a powder keg. Palm Sunday was the explosion. And the people got it. They got it because they knew their scriptures and Jesus was playing their scriptures out right in front of them. Their scriptures told them of a coming, future reality: the shape it would take and the signs there would be of its arrival. Now here Jesus was embodying all that the people of God had anticipated. It was a wild day.

He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, as prophesized in Zechariah. Zechariah had said that this was to be the sign of your coming king. A king! The crowds shouted “Hosanna” which means “Lord, save us!”. A Saviour. On the streets and in the Temple he was heralded as “the Son of David”. God made this promise to King David, 1,000 years earlier: (2 Samuel 7:12-14). “After you have died, I will raise up your offspring after you... I will establish his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me” A son of God as a new eternal ruler!

Then the day got even more dramatic. Jesus went to the Temple, the House of God to the Jews. He upset the business there, saying it has no place in the house of God. Actually he put it much more strongly. He quoted scripture saying, “It is written, My house shall be called a house of prayer; but you are making it a den of thieves”. “My house”? Wow, that was presumptuous to the heretical extreme. His house? This act of cleansing the Temple would not have been lost on the people that day either. Hanukkah was as big in Jesus’ day as it is today. Hanukkah remembers a moment in Jewish history when the Jews took the Temple back from their Greek occupiers, threw away the Greek idols and cleansed the Temple, purifying it for the proper worship of their God. Jesus’ dramatic actions in the Temple were like a new Hanukkah.

And in the midst of all this upheaval in the Temple, with Jesus going around overturning the tables and brandishing a whip, we read in Matthew that children – children – were calling out “Hosanna to the Son

of David". The Temple leaders must have been apoplectic! What Jesus was saying... was doing was beyond belief! But not beyond comprehension – they comprehended it perfectly. That's why they were outraged! So they confronted Jesus, "Do you hear what people are saying?" Eternal King, Saviour, Son of God! How outrageous! In response Jesus quoted from Psalm 8, "Have you not read, Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings thou has perfected praise" (Matt. 21:16, King James). A less jarring response from Jesus would have been hitting them across the head with a bat. What he said was the most breath-taking answer, because in Psalm 8 King David was saying that all God did generated praise for himself. Here, in this moment, Jesus was applying these words to himself. It was as if he was claiming God's place, even as he stood in the Temple! And then, if that wasn't enough, to add confusion to it all, we read in Matthew that in the midst of enacting scripture, fulfilling prophecy, performing these challenging acts and speaking these astonishing words, he was healing the lame, giving sight to the blind, curing the sick, in the Temple, in the midst of this crazy, astonishing event. He was not only making great claims on his own behalf, but he was proving the truth of those claims by demonstrating a power no one had ever seen before him.

The Jesus we find here on Palm Sunday – is that the image of Jesus you have? One who would purposefully stir things up, one who demands attention, one who would put it all on the line, intentionally create a very public crisis that would lead inevitably / predictably to the cross? I must confess: for decades my view of Palm Sunday was far more serene. A genteel victory parade for one person, an orderly and respectful crowd waving branches. But that's not how it was, really. Jesus was choreographing the end of his own life, setting up the inevitability of the end of his life, so his life would end on—of all days!—Passover. The most significant Jewish holy day, representing salvation.

This is not the Jesus we are familiar with. I think we tend to live with a much more domesticated Jesus. We prefer Jesus toned down. We prefer the "buddy" Jesus, the "wise sage" Jesus, the peace and comfort Jesus, the baby Jesus of the manger—"no crying he makes." I think for a lot of Christians the understanding of Jesus we have is the church school version, not the gritty, determined, demonstrative one we see Palm Sunday who was "in your face"... who is "in our face." A domesticated Jesus makes fewer claims on us, makes fewer demands of us. Is more comfortable for us. But the Palm Sunday Jesus was the furthest thing from being comfortable. He put it all out there, to say to his Jewish audience "I am part of God. We are changing the game. And you have to decide whether you will take me seriously." And they did decide: they killed him.

When we read the Gospels, with a domesticated Jesus in mind, we read selectively. Take the Sermon on the Mount. We love the line "Blessed are the merciful for they will receive mercy." We are not as comfortable with "You are the salt of the earth, and if you lose your taste you are no longer good for anything." We love the line, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God." But we are not as keen on the ways to peace Jesus taught, "Love your enemies, and pray for them also, for

this is how you act as children of God.” Are you seeing it? The domesticated Jesus is more accepting, less demanding, less radical. But how did Jesus show up Palm Sunday? That was pretty radical. His message was, “I am part of God. We are changing the game. And you have to decide whether you will take me seriously.”

Lent is coming to an end. We are now entering holy week. The cross is in view. Lent is a penitential season. It is a season of self-reflection, as we anticipate the coming cross. It is a time to consider how much we have domesticated Jesus, and domesticated our sense of faith. It is a time to remember how much God gave for our sake, by letting a part of the eternal God die, for our sake. And then to ask, how do I live for God’s sake? Lent is a season of change, for the aspiration of this season is that we arrive Good Friday travelling a little bit closer to Jesus than we were when Lent began. After all, on Good Friday Jesus went to the cross. But before he did, he taught, “if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. (Luke 9:23)” That doesn’t sound like a domesticated faith, does it?

We call today Palm Sunday, which I think is a very telling choice of names. It puts the emphasis on the happiness of the moment, the celebration, the cheering crowd... but really not even the crowd. It puts the emphasis on a bunch of leaves. Even in the title we give to the stories of this day, we want to distance ourselves from the real powerful events and meaning of the day. That Jesus is the “one who comes in the name of the Lord.” The one to whom people cried, “blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord.” The one who says of the Temple, “my house.” Hosanna! (meaning saviour). The drama of Palm Sunday was Jesus graphically pointing to these understandings of him. I’ve come in the name of the Lord. I’ve come to help you understand my Father. I’ve come to restore right worship. I’ve come to be your Saviour.

This is a very heavy-duty sermon today, isn’t it? But how can it not be? Palm Sunday, now in view of the cross, asks us: do you see this radical Jesus?

How great is his rule, as the King who has come in the name of the Lord, over your life?

Good Friday’s coming.