

Sunday 10th April 2022
John 12:12-19 (and John 1:1-14 & 20:30-31)
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Thank-you Jason.

Lord God, I pray that the word that we now hear from Your word would go deep into our hearts, that You would speak to us and that your Holy Spirit would lead anything that the speaker says, that's not of You, send it away like chaff, but anything that's true, make it hit our hearts like an arrow. Amen.

Last time I was up here it was the second of January and I can remember saying or telling you a little bit about my Sunday School experience. Not sure that that qualifies me to be up here but I was, I've been a regular Sunday School teacher for, I don't know, it was about 25 years and I loved it. It helped me learn the Bible because I prepared and I knew I would get all sorts of interesting questions and interesting feedback from the boys and girls that were there. I'll never forget Jack McManus. I'm sitting and I'm telling some story from the Bible and he turns to his neighbor and he says 'He talks funny.'" Yep, Jack was absolutely right. And then there was the unnamed member of a Sunday School class I was in and this kid was very, very quick on the uptake, you only need to tell him something once. And we were telling a story and he started making a noise like a frog 'Heard it. Heard it. Heard it. Read it. Read it.' Didn't matter what the story was, this kid knew the story.

Don't let me put you off. If you want to join Sunday School teaching, it is fantastic. I genuinely mean that, I genuinely mean that. It's the best thing I think I've ever done on my Christian walk/ But, why am I telling you Sunday school stories? Well, it's because I think today's message falls into that category, of one of those familiar stories that we've heard time and time and time again, and what it means is that we can turn our minds off, we can stop, we can stop thinking about it and it's a real trap for me. It's when someone preaches on the Good Samaritan, because I think I've heard it hundreds of times and I've got to take my brain and really switch on. So, I want to challenge you today, as we look at the story of Palm Sunday - I keep calling it Psalm Sunday - Palm Sunday, not to turn your mind off but to really engage with the story. If you've heard it hundreds and hundreds of times, hear it like it's fresh, and if you have heard it, if this is the first time, then strap yourself in and enjoy it.

We've read the story or we heard this story - I'm using the word story, I mean a report by John from John chapter 12 - and we know it must be an important account because it comes up in all four of the gospels, Jesus triumphant entry into Jerusalem. All four gospels. Now remember, not all four gospels actually recount the birth of Jesus, so this must be significant. The other thing is that, in the Christian tradition, over the course of 2000 years, Palm Sunday is a big deal. Roman Catholics celebrate it big time, Eastern Orthodox Christians celebrate it big time, and Protestants celebrate it as well, and I was going to put some screenshots up of some of the ways in which people celebrate it particularly in the South Pacific but I thought it would be really quite distracting. The other thing is songwriters go to town on it. I could have picked any number of hymns today about Palm Sunday and it's just a big, big theme. But, why? Why is it a big deal?

Let's set the scene:

Last week Scott was preaching from John chapter 11 and he gave us the account of Lazarus being risen from the dead, and he shared with us the deep symbolism, the deep signs of the future of Jesus that were being played out on through the resurrection of Lazarus but also, at a very practical level, you have to say it caused a bit of a stoochie. You don't see people coming back from the dead very often. It was the talk of Judea and the back story from what Scott was sharing and from today's story was that, after it happened, Jesus and his disciples, they had to leave the town, they had to go into the desert region because it had caused such a commotion. They brought a dead man back to life and, of course, the Pharisees, the church leaders of the day, were concerned about it. They created a meeting of the Sanhedrin and so we start chapter 12 with Jesus coming back from the desert and going back into Bethany and it says that there's a large crowd spot him. We read if we look at chapter 12 in verse 19 and verse 9 it says 'Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and they came not only because of him but also to see Lazarus who he had raised from the dead. So, the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well for, on account of him, many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him.'

So, there's something happening here, without doubt. Jesus is going public because, up until this point yes, Jesus had a public ministry, but it was quite low profile but then, suddenly, things start to get stirred up and it's the start of the Passover festival with Jews coming into Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Josephus tells us, and I don't know how he could have come up with that figure but Josephus, the Jewish historian at the time said that during Passover Jerusalem swelled by maybe two million people. But also remember, that at that time, Judea was like a vassal state, it was like Belarus or maybe like Hong Kong, it was kind of under its own control but not really, because the Romans still utterly dominated and the Romans had the local officials and the local leaders in their pocket. It was corrupt and the time of the Passover was when real rebellion started to swell and people were looking for this, looking for other options, they were looking to be free, there was a sense of stirring all over the place, if you like. Jerusalem was a hotbed and we know that that's a fact because before the time of Jesus there'd been revolutions and soon after the time of Jesus there'd been such a desperate revolution that Jerusalem was destroyed and the temple was destroyed. So, it's some picture but right in the middle of this picture, of this jumble of Passover in Jerusalem comes Jesus and he's riding on a colt, a young donkey. We get that from the other gospels that the young colt has its mother beside it and that's significant because this wasn't some little toy horse, this was an unredeemed male donkey, full of massive symbolism to the Jews and here was Jesus taking on a deliberate challenge because He was taking on the symbol of kingship and riding into and towards Jerusalem.

Jesus was being provocative really, in a very public way because, at this time in Judea, you didn't rock the boat, you stayed on board with the Romans, you were in bed with the Romans. Remember, for example, Herod and his cronies. Herod that the moment that there was a suggestion of adultery he had the head of John the Baptist. But here was Jesus rabble-rousing, Jesus was being incendiary.

Now I want you to pause and think about that picture because, so often the picture we have of Jesus is kind of that stained glass Jesus, meek and mild, touching the heads of little children and well, this is this is quite a different looking Jesus altogether. He's working up the crowds again, if we look at the passage, if we look at verse 12 'A great crowd had come to the feast and they took Palm branches and they 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 young donkey and he sat upon it, as it was written: 'Do not be afraid oh Daughter of Zion, see your king is coming seated on a donkey's colt.'" Now, the Romans might not get it, but the Jews, who knew their Bible, did and they knew the symbolism of a man on a donkey processing.

He was coming in as a future king. He was coming in as a liberator. He knew exactly what he was doing. It wasn't as if he'd got tired legs and decided that he would just find a donkey to save the walk. This comes straight from the passages of Psalms. Psalm 118 'Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the king of Israel.' And the crowds were getting it. The crowd knew that something was happening, that there was something about this being the promised leader and just imagine the sense of rebellion that's brewing at the time amongst the language of the of the festival of the Passover. Here comes a revolutionary, here comes a man to save us. This is looking like a coup. This is looking like a revolution, a power grab.

Now, is that the Jesus that we've come to read about and think about over many years? Is that the kind of Jesus that we teach to our kids in Sunday School?

This man looks like he is on a power grab.

What's going to happen?

Here's a nobody, a man from up north in Galilee, he had a career as a carpenter, he then becomes some sort of traveling teacher, preacher and now, here he is, crossing swords with the authorities in Jerusalem. A complete upstart. So, if you were looking at this story, if you're in the story and thinking it was a novel or a picture, what's going to happen? I suggest it can only go one of two ways. Somehow this is the start of an uprising and Jesus is going to take over Jerusalem, he's going to seize power and he's going to take on the Romans now. It's not as fanciful as it sounds. People genuinely had that notion at the time and Jesus was literally going to become King of the Jews. Now, in a week's time we know that that phrase King of the Jews is used in a very different way. Put yourself in the story. You see, it's not so outlandish. Muhammad the founder of the Muslim faith certainly operated that way. Muhammad carried a sword and he used it.

So, that's one thing that might happen. What else can happen?

Well, it's pretty obvious the authorities are going to deal to Him, they're going to get Him and we see that theme coming through that the Pharisees were already plotting to kill Jesus, indeed, they were now plotting to kill Lazarus as well because that would have

been quite a convenient mop-up. And if they don't catch Him, well, he'll sleek away back into the desert again with his disciples and that'll be the end of that. All a very unfortunate mistake.

But look at verse 16. Even his disciples don't know what's going on. 'At first his disciples did not understand all this only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that they had been and that they had done these things to him.'

And that's where I want you to capture the story, capture the significance of what John is doing here. You see, this is a critical moment, it's a critical moment in the life of Jesus because it's His big reveal.

I'm calling it a hinge moment. Heather knows I've been speaking spending all week trying to find a hinge that I could show you, that just didn't work but what I'm meaning is it's a hinge moment in a story that John wrote down. You see, for 11 chapters from John through chapter 1 to 11, he's telling the story of Jesus and he's telling the signs but then, at this moment of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, it's a hinge because from this point on, from chapter 12 to the end, we're getting to see the real story, the real revelation of why Jesus came and that's why, that's why I had for read for us the very beginning of John's gospel, that's why I put the images up of the of the of the papyrus that John wrote his whole book to demonstrate who Jesus was and this is a hinge point in it.

Let's go back to John 1. I'm going to read those five verses again, they're very, very famous verses but I want you to get it and I want you to listen again as if it's for the first time. So don't, in your mind, go 'Heard it. Heard it. Heard it.' Listen to it for the first time. In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. That light shines in the darkness but the darkness has not understood it.' That is John's story. That's why he wrote it down.

But, but I think it sounds preposterous. Jesus Christ is God. He came to earth as a human being. It's preposterous!

Now, you may have been coming to church all your days, I teased John, I know he's been coming to church all his days but you may have been coming to church all your days and this has kind of just washed over you over time. It's a strange and bizarre statement that a human being came to earth and he was God. That is the Easter story, that is the Christmas story and John wrote this for a reason and I'm sorry but I think it sounds strange. He is God.

But it goes further. John chapter 1 verse 10 'He was in the world and though the world was made through him the world did not recognize him.' Verse 14 'The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and

only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.' Jason prayed that we might hear the truth. Jesus is the truth. But it's a really big claim and it's a claim that our modern world thinks it's kind of grown out of.

If Fergal Keane or Clive Myrie presented the news tonight and said that there's a guy in, there's a guy who's coming to Jerusalem and he's claiming to be the king of the Jews, he's claiming to be the Son of God, well, I kind of know what your reaction would be because I kind of know what my reaction would be to that sort of news report. But that is the claim, that is the claim that John made and he was an eyewitness. Again, that was the point of me putting up the papyrus, he was there and we can trust the evidence of eyewitnesses. But getting back to what Scott's been preaching to us for the last four or five weeks from chapter 1 through 11, there's been signs all the way through John's message of the Messiah but now that subtle sign is stopping and he's actually here in Jerusalem Bang! presenting Himself as the king.

The only thing is, a week later or five days later, they're marching Him to the cross and the accolades of the crowds and the Hosanna-business is all behind Him and He's being put to put to death, put to death, and then the strange story that on the Sunday he rises again.

Now please, I totally get it, I totally get that you may think 'Look I can't accept this. It's an absurd story. It's made up.' Maybe that's you. Maybe at best you're sitting here today and you're a skeptic or maybe you're thinking 'You know what, I've never given it any thought. I've never given it any thought. I've lived a good life. I've always thought of myself as a Christian. I grew up with all these stories, they're nice stories and well, I've just gone along with them.' I don't know, maybe you're different from that all together and you're just, you're just a person who said 'I'm not, it's not hard for me. I just accept it. I just believe.' Or maybe you're just not clear. maybe you still just puzzling it through. If that's you, then good on you, keep puzzling, keep puzzling. You see, wherever you are on the spectrum of belief, you've got to make something of this account, of this guy coming into Jerusalem on a donkey which was deeply, deeply wrong, symbolically wrong, to be riding on an unredeemed young male colt, deeply wrong and yet, the crowds are going crazy and singing 'Hosanna! Hosanna!' because they see in the context of the of the Passover Festival that the Messiah is coming, and then a week later it's all gone. You've got to make something of it. You've got to, even if it's like I'm ignoring it.

The disciples didn't know either and I think that's quite interesting. Remember we get to know the end story because we can jump to the end of the story but, at the time, the disciples are clueless and I don't mean that unkindly to the disciples, it's not being revealed.

The young donkey, only Jesus knows what the donkey's for. Only Jesus knows of the coming betrayal of Judas. Only Jesus knows that Peter will deny Him. Only Jesus knows the outcome of His trial before it happens. And only Jesus knows that He's going to the cross. Because, through chapters 12 to 21, we're seeing a story of bedlam,

bedlam and I don't, I don't blame the disciples for being confused by it. Look at poor Thomas - he gets a hard time in the scriptures sometimes - I think he says 'Well Jesus, we don't know where you're going, we don't know what you're doing, we don't know the way,' Jesus turns to in chapter 14 and then says, 'I am the way. I am the truth. I am the life.' This notion of truth has been thrown away in our society today. Nobody believes in truth. Jesus says 'I am the truth.' Again, it's a big claim and you've got to have a reaction to it whether you believe it or reject it.

So, where does that leave us? Back to my Sunday School answer, have you 'Heard it. Heard it. Heard it?'

I'm told that the intensive care nurse who looked after Boris Johnson when he was near death told him the story of the gospel. So I know the Prime Minister of Great Britain and Northern Ireland has heard the gospel and pray God he doesn't say 'Heard it. Heard it. I heard it.'

Why don't you take a little time this week, find a Bible, find John's gospel, there's a few going free at the front of the church, and read it. Read it from chapter 12 to 21. See how far you can get. See what you make of it.

Those old bits of papyrus, copied from 2,000 years ago, and copied, and copied, and copied, and copied, and copied, and shared, there's got to be something in it. Our Lord lets you reject it but He also gives you a very, very clear picture.

Jesus is God. See what you make of His death and resurrection as we move into Easter.

Let's pray:

Lord, may Your word touch us. May Your gospel go deep down inside us, even if we've heard it before, and reveal Jesus, the Way, the Truth and the Life, Amen.