

Palm Sunday 2023

Blessed Disillusionment

Happy Palm Sunday! Given that it's Holy Week, we're going to take a break from our series in Ephesians to remember Palm Sunday, and next week we'll return to the Empty Tomb. The Sunday after Easter we will resume our journey through Ephesians.

So, with no further ado, let us first read John's brief account found in John 12:12-19.

¹²The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. ¹³So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!" ¹⁴And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written,

¹⁵"Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!"

¹⁶His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him. ¹⁷The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to bear witness. ¹⁸The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they heard he had done this sign. ¹⁹So the Pharisees said to one another, "You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him."

As we join Jesus on His entrance into Jerusalem, I will present my observations under three subheadings: 1) The Hope of the Resurrection; 2) The Ironic Accuracy of a Mistaken People; and 3) The Catalyst of Understanding.

I. The Hope of the Resurrection

Have you ever been right about something, even when you were totally wrong about all your assumptions? I remember back in school how frustrating it was when the math teacher would force me to show my work as a means of justifying how I came to my answer. I thought that was ridiculous at the time. However, having lived half a century, I get it now. I get how sometimes you can be right because you're lucky or you jumped to the end, but even if you are right for the moment, if your assumptions are all wrong, your little moment of being right is going to come crashing down in a hurry.

That's the situation when it comes to Palm Sunday and our Lord's triumphant entry into Jerusalem. At every turn, people are right to be celebrating Jesus...He is worthy to be praised, He is the King, He is their Savior...but all of their assumptions surrounding Jesus are wrong. Whenever I read the gospel accounts of the triumphant entry, one word comes to mind every time: irony. We're going to spend a little time tracking the irony of this story...but trust me, I have a point to make...and you're probably not going to like it...and you'll likely send me an email when we're done...but hey, let's just go there anyways, OK? Sometimes the truth hurts, but TRUTH MATTERS, so we can trust God to leverage that truth for our good.

Let's begin with the first bit of irony that is uniquely articulated in John's Gospel. In order to appreciate this bit of irony, we must go back a bit and remember what takes place shortly before Jesus arrives in Jerusalem.

I'm sure you all remember that back in John 11, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead after he had been in the grave for four days. What you might not remember is that there were a ton of people there that day when Jesus performed His greatest public miracle. In fact, just before Jesus called Lazarus to rise from the grave, there were some who questioned Jesus' power in John 11:37, saying: "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?"

Well, as you might recall, Jesus could have kept Lazarus from dying, but instead He allowed Lazarus to die. Early on in John 11:4, when Jesus learned that Lazarus was mortally ill, Jesus told His disciples: "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."

Now...remember those words...they are very important, and we'll come back to the glory of God and the means by which the Son of God may be glorified...this is all very important, so don't forget this part, OK?

Alright, so...as you recall, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead when in John 11:43 He cries out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"

Imagine if you will that you were there on that day! Imagine seeing a man who was dead for four days...whose body was already wreaking of decay...suddenly stumble out of the cave that was his tomb, wrapped up like a mummy. In addition to being amazed, astounded, and maybe a little grossed out...what assumptions are you now making about the Galilean carpenter who just performed that miracle? Who do suspect this man Jesus might be?

Now, the Apostle John writes these words immediately following the great miracle in John 11:45-46: "Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what He did, believed in Him, but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done." The product of seeing a "resurrection from the dead" was twofold: one group of people believed in Jesus as the Messiah of God; another group of people found this resurrection to be a source of great concern. The Pharisees, hearing of this great miracle of resurrection, worried that, due to His many miraculous signs and wonders, "everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation." As a result, "...from that day on they made plans to put Him to death."

When Jesus hears that the Pharisees are plotting to kill Him, He withdraws to the region of Ephraim and goes dark for a few weeks...waiting until the Passover festival was drawing nigh, and then...watch this...the day before He rides a colt into Jerusalem...He goes back to Bethany...back to the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, and they have a big, public party! John records in John 12:9, "When the large crowd of Jews learned that Jesus was there [in Bethany], they came, not only on account of Him, but also to see Lazarus, whom He had raised

from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death as well because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus.”

Church, can you feel the tension? Can you see the irony? People are believing in Jesus...and the Pharisees want to kill Jesus and Lazarus...because of the hope of the resurrection...the resurrection of *Lazarus*!

This brings us to our text for this morning and my second subheading...

II. The Ironic Accuracy of a Mistaken People

Listen for the irony in what John writes:

The next day [the day after the party at Lazarus' home], the large crowd that had come to the feast [Passover] heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet Him, crying out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!" And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written, "Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt!"

John writes a few verses later, The crowd that had been with Him when He called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to bear witness. The reason the crowd went to meet Him was that they heard he had done this sign. So the Pharisees said to one another, "You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after Him."

Mercy...talk about irony...it's all over the place in this story!

First of all, let's admit that the crowds are RIGHT to be excited about the hope of the resurrection, but their hope is in the WRONG resurrection.

The crowds are RIGHT to be bearing witness about the power of the resurrection, but again, all of their assumptions about the power of the resurrection are WRONG. No doubt they are thinking that a man who can raise the dead can raise an army...not unlike the prophecies of Ezekiel and the desert of dry bones! But Jesus didn't come to raise an army; He came to save the world.

The crowds are RIGHT to be praising Jesus as the rightful, long-awaited King, but all of their assumptions about that King are WRONG. Jesus has not come to elevate Israel and challenge Rome...Jesus has come to die for sinners and conquer the power of sin and death.

The crowds are RIGHT in crying "Hosanna" which means "save us now!" Jesus has come to save them, but they are all wrong in the way they are thinking about His saving work. Jesus will not save them from Rome...in fact, many of those standing in Jerusalem today will be slaughtered by the Romans in AD 70. Jesus will "save" them; but not in the way they think.

The Pharisees are RIGHT to be concerned about the power of Jesus and His influence on the world, but they are so WRONG about their nationalistic and selfish assumptions. Jesus is no direct threat to Rome or the Pharisees; and yet, there is no small amount of irony in the fact that

Jesus must die, on the day of Passover, at the ninth hour, in Israel, in order to save the world from the power of sin and death! In other words, Jesus does not deserve their animosity, but the whole plan of salvation rests upon their animosity! It is also ironic that after Jesus dies and is resurrected, some three hundred years later, it will be the LOVE of Jesus that conquers Rome...not a sword!

The crowds are RIGHT to celebrate the arrival of their long-awaited King, but they are WRONG in their assumptions of His military intentions even though He comes riding in on a baby donkey as a sign of his gentleness and humility.

Church...can you see the amazing amount of irony in this story? Can you see how just about everybody, with the exception of Jesus, is operating on wrong assumptions? They are saying the right things...they are behaving in the right way...but they are completely clueless as to the ultimate plan and design of God that is so counter-intuitive...so counter-nationalistic...so counter to the power politics of the day. Even though they are right in their worship...they are wrong in their understanding. In fact, they are so wrong...so horribly inaccurate in their assumptions, that when Jesus fails to live up to their assumptions, many of these very same people will soon be shouting, "Crucify Him!"

Now...what are we to learn from this story?

My I be uncomfortably direct with you? After all, I have a long and well-documented history of offending people on Palm Sunday, so this should come as no surprise! Listen: as a guy who has served as a pastor in churches my entire adult life...some 35 years or so...I have seen so many church members say and do all the right things for all the wrong reasons! I have seen, even in myself, the irony of Palm Sunday played out over and over again. Let me give you a few examples.

Just as the Jewish crowds praised Jesus because they believed that He would bless and exalt their nation above all the other nations, so I have seen countless examples of American Christians singing praises to Jesus, all the time believing that Jesus has come to exalt America above all the other nations. Consider this historical fact: within 36 years of Christ's death and resurrection, Jerusalem...and the entire nation of Israel...no longer existed. Rome burned the city to the ground in A.D. 70, killing nearly a million souls and selling the rest into slavery in neighboring countries. What if we had undeniable evidence that Kansas City, and the entire United States, would no longer exist 36 years from now. Would your faith in Jesus remain? We always need to check how closely we have married our worship of Jesus with our nationalistic expectations and assumptions.

Here's another example: Just as the crowds sang praises to Jesus because of the demonstration of His power, I have seen so many Christians sing praises to Jesus because of the demonstrative power of signs and wonders, missing the key teachings of Jesus that call us to live by faith and not by sight...to rejoice not because "the spirits are subject to you, but because your names are

written in heaven.” Let us not mistake our love for power with a love for Jesus. Many a believing soul has endured long times of imprisonment, torture, debilitating diseases, mental illness, and other means of horrific suffering, all the while singing praises to Jesus. They understood what the scriptures teach us so clearly: our praise for Jesus is always more authentic when we praise Him not so much for His power, but for the fact that He knows what it means to suffer and He joins us in our suffering, amen?

I could go on...I have seen many serve Jesus and His Church with tremendous enthusiasm, but so often people serve for their own glory and for the acknowledgment of others.

I have seen people give significant resources to a ministry, only to turn around and try to manipulate the ministry and its leader by leveraging their giving.

All of us as Christians are very capable of repeating the irony we have observed in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. We can easily find ourselves doing all the right things for all the wrong reasons. That observation should humble us all, but here’s what’s even more telling: when we do the right things for the wrong reasons...and then our assumptions are proven wrong...it often leads to hostility.

Have you often wondered why the crowds were so quick to turn on Jesus? I think we can capture the answer with one word: disillusionment. Whenever we have high expectations combined with wrong assumptions fueled by well-intended praise...we have the perfect recipe for profound disillusionment.

Now consider this ironic truth: That horrible, visceral, violent disillusionment got Jesus killed...*at exactly the right place, on exactly the right day, at exactly the right hour.*

Which is to say: disillusionment was always the plan. Think about this word that I’ve just employed...it’s a good one: dis/illusion. High expectations plus wrong assumptions plus well-intended praise equals ILLUSION. An illusion is 1) a thing that is wrongly perceived; 2) a false idea or belief.

Church, can we be thankful that God loves us too much to allow us to be walking around with an illusion of who Jesus is? Can we be thankful that Jesus was willing to ride in on that colt, playing the part of the Messianic King which is who He is, receiving the well-deserved praise that He is due, all the time anticipating the immense disillusionment that would sweep across this crowd and lead to His excruciating death on a cross? And can we be grateful for this example of how dangerous it is to place our faith in an idea of our making rather than the actual revealed Word made flesh?

Let us always be prepared to consider the possibility that we have been doing the right things for the wrong reasons. More than that, let us assume that we are probably doing some right things for the wrong reasons even now! And let us be quick to repent when the TRUTH is made clear

so that our worship is not based upon false assumptions, lest we bring upon ourselves a dark season of disillusionment that may well lead us to walk away from our faith.

We must always and only worship Jesus on His own terms; not ours. We must think more of Jesus' expectations of us as compared to our expectations of Him. Jesus is our LORD...He is not our buddy, our genie in a bottle, or even an American! Jesus is LORD...He is our King, and He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, amen?

So...now that I've hurt your feelings and mine, we are all asking a reasonable question: how would I know if I were doing the right things for the wrong reasons? Great question...let's look to my third and final subheading.

III. The Catalyst of Understanding

Right there in the middle of our text is a small commentary by John...who was, after all, a disciple himself. Here's what he writes in vs. 16: His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered these things had been written about Him and been done to Him.

First of all, let us find comfort in remembering that the disciples, who walked with Jesus every day for three years, did not immediately understand "these things." In fact, I think we can safely assume that even the disciples went through a season of profound disillusionment, especially Judas. I think it's clear that Satan leveled some source of disillusionment in Judas to convince him to betray Christ into the hands of the Pharisees. Listen Church: even those closest to Jesus can discover that they have been holding some wrong assumptions about Jesus, and inevitably those wrong assumptions can and often do lead to a season of disillusionment.

But notice, at some point, the disciples did learn...they were able to move beyond their disillusionment to see clearly and correctly who Jesus was. They went from not understanding to understanding. John describes the catalyst to understanding this way, "...when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered these things had been written about Him...."

Now, I suspect John was referring to the ascension of Jesus, when He was lifted up and seated at the right hand of the Father. There may also be a cloaked reference to the coming of the Holy Spirit because we know the Holy Spirit could not come until Jesus was glorified.¹ John doesn't unpack this statement; he writes it very matter-of-factly and then moves on. Even so, I suspect that the catalyst for understanding is still the same today as it was in the first century. The catalyst to understanding would appear to consist of two parts: 1) the glorification of Jesus; and 2) remembering these things that have been written about Him.

If we really want to know who Jesus is as compared to our assumptions about who Jesus is, we must start by looking for Jesus glorified. If you are interested in finding Jesus glorified, I

¹ John 7:39 "Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified."

suggest you visit a homeless shelter, or a struggling non-profit that seeks to help people break free from addictions, or perhaps visit with a family who has recently lost a child. Visit those who suffer for the name of Jesus throughout the world. In my experience, it is often the meek, the broken-hearted, the peacemakers, the poor in spirit, the merciful, the persecuted and the hungry who are quick to glorify Jesus...and I'm pretty sure Jesus identified exactly those kinds of people as the first to bring Him glory. If you are looking to find Jesus glorified, I wouldn't spend too much time poking around churches...many churches have lost their first love and exchanged the truth for a lie. Instead, seek out those who know Jesus personally and live in a dependent relationship with Him...there you will find Jesus glorified, and there you might find the understanding that you are looking for.

That said, all of our assumptions about Jesus should always line up with what has been written about Him in God's Word. Before we go off have half-cocked and tell people that Jesus will heal every sickness if we pray hard enough and have enough faith, let's remember that Jesus didn't heal Lazarus...He let Lazarus die. But He raised Lazarus up from the dead "for the glory of God and so that the Son of Man may glorified through it." God's glory matters a lot. Jesus' glory matters a lot. And this is what we find when we read the Bible. It's not about you, it's not about me, it's not about our health, or our country, or Israel, or our children, or even our church...it's always about the glory of God and His Son, Jesus.

Church, check your assumptions about Jesus by reading the word of God. Check your assumptions about His power, His healing, His commitment to America, His commitment to any country, His commitment to make your life comfortable, His commitment to leave you alone, His commitment to bless you financially, His commitment to ensure you get all the glory and attention you deserve, His commitment to always protect your children from harm, His commitment to always give the bad guys exactly what they deserve, His commitment to show you favor because you hold to correct doctrine...check your assumptions with the Word of God, and ask the Holy Spirit to correct you of any wrong assumptions that you carry about in your heart and mind concerning Jesus. In other words, ask the Holy Spirit to disillusion you! Let's be done with illusions about Jesus and our favor and our goodness and our preferred future...and let's get on with following and worshiping the REAL Jesus, the REAL Messiah of God, with genuine, well-grounded expectations that are based in scripture and not our feelings, amen?

Finally, let us thank God for the blessed disillusionment that Christ both provoked and endured on our behalf. Jesus died on that cross to show us the deep, deep love of God for sin-sick, twisted, self-deceived people...people like us. Let us spend time thanking God every day this week as we draw close to the cross that God so loved the world that He gave us His only Son, that whosoever would believe in Him would not perish but inherit eternal life. Let us lift our voices in praise, for if we remain silent, even the rocks will cry out! Praise the Lord!

Will you pray with me?