

The King Has Come

The Meaning of Palm Sunday

Today is Palm Sunday, of course, but what does that mean and why is it called that?

Today we celebrate what has become known as Christ's "Triumphal Entry" into Jerusalem. This occurred on the Sunday before the Friday he was crucified. It is called "Palm Sunday" because the crowds that greeted Christ waved palm fronds as he passed by.

Palm branches symbolized victory and peace. As such, palm branches were usually associated with conquering warriors or kings. The Jewish crowds waved palm fronds before Jesus and sang praises to him because they hoped he was coming as a political Messiah to overthrow the Romans. They hoped Christ would bring a military victory and peace as a result.

However, there is a great irony in calling this Christ's "Triumphal Entry." That's because four days later these same adoring crowds would abandon Jesus, as did his disciples and other followers, and he was put to death. Jesus' promising victory march into Jerusalem ended in what appeared to be a devastating defeat only a few days later.

So why do we see Palm Sunday as a time to celebrate Jesus' triumph? In what way was he triumphant on that day?

Didn't the real triumph and peace occur one week later when Jesus arose from the dead, victorious over sin, Satan, and death? Well, yes and no.

Of course, Easter does mark Christ's ultimate victory over those forces and the resulting peace we can now have with God.

But Christ's entry into Jerusalem can also be seen as triumphant because for the first time he was allowing himself to be publicly proclaimed as King, as the Messiah.

Remember how on many occasions after Jesus would heal someone, they would want to tell others that he was the Messiah? Remember how Jesus warned them to tell no one who he really was for "his time had not yet come"? He didn't want to be publicly acknowledged as the Messiah at those times because it would have brought unwanted scrutiny from the Roman officials as well as from Jewish religious leaders. It would have also increased his notoriety to such a degree that the resulting crowds would have made it difficult for him to efficiently carry out his ministry.

But now, at last, he allowed the crowds to publicly hail him as the Messiah, as King. Jesus entered Jerusalem as King on his own terms. Granted, he was not the political Messiah the Jews hungered for and expected. But he entered Jerusalem as Messiah in the truest sense of the word — One who would save his people from their sins by going to the Cross on their behalf.

Jesus entered Jerusalem triumphantly as King, knowing his ultimate victory and peace were just around the corner.

Furthermore, while Jesus was first publicly acknowledged as King on Palm Sunday, Jesus didn't become King on that day. He was born King. At Jesus' birth, the Kingdom of God had been inaugurated on earth. Jesus' entire earthly ministry, all his teachings and miracles, were a demonstration of the rule and reign of God.

So when he entered Jerusalem, he rode in as the King of the Kingdom of God. He rode in looking forward to the most powerful in-breaking of the Kingdom that would ever occur. That took place in his resurrection one week later.

So, yes, the throngs of people were correct to hail Jesus as King and wave palm branches as signs of victory and peace. They were correct... but not for the reasons they were doing so.

We celebrate Palm Sunday because on Palm Sunday, the King had come. The King had come publicly. The King had come in fulfillment of OT prophecy. King Jesus had come to bring victory and peace, through his imminent death and resurrection, to all who would believe in him.

As we read Matthew's account of the Triumphal Entry, let's keep these themes in mind: That Jesus was being hailed as King and that he came in victory and to bring peace.

At the same time, let's consider what it means for us today that Jesus is King. Let's consider how we today can walk in his victory and experience his peace.

The Triumphal Entry

Mt. 21:1 — *As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. ³If anyone says anything to you, tell him that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away.”*

Luke, in his gospel, gives us the owners' reaction:

Luke 19:32 — *Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. ³³As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?”*

³⁴*They replied, “The Lord needs it.”*

³⁵*They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it.*

I've always found this to be one of the more curious passages in the gospels. I mean, think about it:

Say you're out on the street next to your car one day when two perfect strangers come up and try to take your car and drive away! Naturally, you scream, “Hey! What do you think you're doing?!” They reply, “The Lord has need of your car.”

How would you respond? “Oh sure, here are the keys.” Or perhaps you would say something a little more colorful?

Well, that is essentially what happened in that village in Israel. Except the owners didn't mind handing over the keys to their donkey. Incredible!

How exactly were they able to persuade the owners to let their donkey go? Sometimes I imagine the two disciples must have used something like Jedi mind tricks to get the donkey:

The owners scream, "Hey, what are you doing untying our donkey?!"

The disciples calmly respond, "The Lord has need of it."

The owners, now in a trance-like state, repeat, "The Lord has need of it," and hand over the reins to their donkey.

In any event, had Jesus prearranged an agreement with the owners to borrow their donkey and colt on that day? Or was this purely a supernatural event, with Jesus exercising prophetic insight and the Holy Spirit persuading the owners to comply with the disciples' request? The text does not tell us so we can't be sure.

More importantly, why did Jesus choose to enter Jerusalem on a donkey rather than on foot or on a horse? As we see in Matt. 21, it was to fulfill a Messianic prophecy found in Zech. 9:9. Matthew writes:

⁴This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

⁵"Say to the Daughter of Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'"

Jesus chose to enter Jerusalem on a donkey because, in doing so, he was proclaiming himself to be the Messiah long foretold in the Hebrew scriptures. In addition, he chose a donkey rather than a horse because horses symbolized war while donkeys symbolized peace.

A king marching to war would ride a horse. But a king on a mission of peace would choose a lowly donkey.

Furthermore, the next verse in Zechariah after the one Matthew quoted, goes on to say that the coming King will "*proclaim peace to the nations.*"

So, for those Jews in the crowd who were familiar with Messianic prophecy, the message Jesus was sending was clear: "I am the coming King, the Messiah, and I come to bring peace, not war."

The Jews were in trying circumstances. They were downtrodden, defeated. They were over-taxed. The Roman government was oppressive. (Any of this sound familiar?!)

They were longing for the Messiah to come and deliver them, to defeat the Romans and restore David's kingdom.

So here comes Jesus, the true Messiah, bringing spiritual rather than political or military victory and peace. He would accomplish victory — not over the Romans — but over sin,

Satan, and death through his death and resurrection. He would bring peace — not between the Jews and their earthly enemies — but between God and man.

For those of us alive today — on the other side of that Palm Sunday, on the other side of that first Easter — how can we find victory and peace in our own trying circumstances?

I believe there are a couple of answers found in the lesson of today's text.

First of all, notice that Matthew is emphasizing that Jesus is King.

Acknowledge Jesus as King

One way we can experience victory and peace in trying circumstances is by acknowledging Jesus as KING!

We may think, well of course Jesus is King. He's our Lord and Savior. He is the Creator of the universe. He's God! So, of course he's King.

But I don't mean we should intellectually agree that Jesus is King. Naturally, I would expect us all to agree to that without hesitation. No problem.

What I mean is that for us to know true victory and peace, we have to live like Jesus is King! We have to act as though we believe that with every fiber of our being.

We must breathe the reality that Jesus rules over our every area of our lives, over every horrible circumstance, over every one of our "enemies." Jesus rules over illness, over distressed relationships, over people who treat us badly, over desperate financial situations, etc.

Constantly reminding ourselves that He is in control helps bring us a measure of victory over our situations and peace to our inner thoughts.

However, it's not always easy to see that Jesus is in control in our lives.

We want the King to enter into our circumstances riding on a powerful stallion. We want Jesus to come in as the conquering warrior King, wielding his mighty sword to wipe out all our problems.

Yet, he more often enters our lives in a quiet, more unassuming way as the humble Messiah riding on a lowly donkey.

Just as Jesus defied the Jews' expectations of him as Messiah, more often than not, Jesus defies our expectations of how we want him to act as King in our lives. Even when we don't see him ruling in our lives, it is exactly at that point when we most need to declare that He is King!

Jesus is not only in control, ruling all our affairs, when things are going well. He is also in control when things look most out of control. Sometimes we have to force our wills to acknowledge that, to believe that, because it baffles our senses.

There are times we may not see him at work, we may not feel his presence, we may not even hear his voice, but he is there. And he is not just standing idly by. He is at work behind the scenes in complete control. He is orchestrating all that happens to ultimately conform our character to be more like his. He is working to draw us closer to Himself, to increase our dependence on Him.

We often sing the song “Everything Is in His Hands.” That sums it up perfectly. Jesus has everything in hand! All the time! Even when the world seems to be crashing down around us. Even when we think, “Is anybody at the wheel?!”

Example of the economy:

A perfect example is the current global economy. It clearly seems to be spiraling out of control and even the best and brightest minds from around the world can't rein it in. As a result, many of our own personal economic situations are spiraling out of control and we feel helpless to reverse the slide.

It may seem as if political forces or corrupt business people or conflicted economists or Satan himself have doomed us and are in control. That is when we need to pause and reaffirm to ourselves that Jesus is King. That Jesus is calmly ruling on his throne, despite outward appearances.

Some of us are facing nightmarish situations regarding work and relationships. Even in those worst of situations, consciously declaring to ourselves that Jesus is King helps to restore our equilibrium. Focusing on the fact that Jesus rules can alleviate our tortured thoughts and impart a measure of peace.

Example of Job:

Job set a good example for us in this. Few, if any of us, have it as bad as Job. In one day, Job lost all of his children and possessions. Yet, what was the cry of his heart in the midst of his grief? Essentially, it was “Lord, everything is in your hands.” And, “Lord, you are good.”

The key questions for us are:

Will we acknowledge Jesus as King at all times? Will we accept His rulership of our lives? Will we gratefully yield to how he wants to rule versus how we want him to rule?

If we are to know peace and victory over the worst of circumstances, we have to reach the place of honestly declaring, “Jesus, you are King! Everything is in your hands. And I know you are good and loving and have my best interests at heart.”

Example of Bill Truran:

My friend Bill Truran has another way of putting it. Instead of saying “Jesus is King,” Bill simply says, “Jesus is the Boss.” We prayed together for a long time for God to give Bill a certain business opportunity that he very much wanted. When the opportunity fell through, Bill could have gotten down about it. It would have been perfectly understandable for him to be upset. Instead, Bill shrugged and said, “God's the Boss. So the Boss has something else for me to work on.”

That's the attitude I'm talking about... knowing God's the Boss. Knowing Jesus is King and living that out gives us a great resiliency in the face of disappointment and troubles.

The King has come. The King is here.

The Crowds Praise Jesus

Going back to Matthew 21, we read:

6The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. 7They brought the donkey and the colt, placed their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them. 8A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 9The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,

*“Hosanna to the Son of David!” “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”
“Hosanna in the highest!”*

Matthew doesn't explicitly state that the branches the crowd spread before Jesus were palm branches. In fact, John is the only gospel writer who clearly identifies them as palm branches.

Why did the crowd spread their cloaks as well as the tree branches before the Lord? Doing so was held to be a sign of respect. Filled with excitement, this was a way for the people to spontaneously pay tribute to Jesus.

The large crowds were pilgrims from all over the land who had journeyed to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover.

The O.T. Law required that Passover be celebrated in Jerusalem, that every Jewish male participate annually in the festival, and that each worshiper offer an animal sacrifice (Deut. 16:1-8, 16-17). Jesus obeyed all these stipulations; yet he offered not an animal but himself—the final Passover sacrifice (20:28; 26:17-30).

When the crowd shouted — *“Hosanna to the Son of David!” “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” “Hosanna in the highest!”* — they were quoting Psalm 118, one of the Psalms of Ascent. The Psalms of Ascent consisted of Psalms 113-118. These were the songs sung by the people of Israel while they climbed up the hill to Jerusalem on their way to the annual feasts. They sang these songs to express thanksgiving, praise, and petitions to God.

Out of all of the Psalms of Ascent that Matthew might have heard that day, he chose to record that the people chanted Psalm 118:25-26. That is significant because Psalm 118 is a Messianic psalm.

In Hebrew, the word “Hosanna” originally meant “Save us now,” a prayer of petition. Over time, “Hosanna” came to be an exclamation of praise (like “Hallelujah!”). Christians today still use “Hosanna” as an expression of praise to Jesus.

With some degree of understanding, the people were praising Jesus as the Messiah by applying these words from Psalm 118 to him.

In addition, in Luke's account of the Triumphal Entry, he says the crowds were praising God for all the miracles they had seen Jesus perform.

So there is a clear indication in this part of the narrative that the people were offering praise to Jesus. In the midst of their despondent situation, the Jews were able to find a measure of joy, hope, and relief through praise.

Praise Jesus in All Circumstances

The same is true for us today.

This brings us to the second answer to our question, "How can we find victory and peace in our own trying circumstances?"

The answer being... **we can experience victory and peace in difficult times by offering heartfelt praise to Jesus.**

In addition to acknowledging Jesus as King in all circumstances, we need to praise him in all circumstances.

I hear what you're thinking: "Wow, Clint, that's deep!" "I'm a Christian. Of course, I worship the Lord in all circumstances!"

Well, I don't mean to insult you, but do we really? Do we really pour out our heart in joyful praise as much in the bad times as in the good?

May I ask that we take an honest self-inventory and see if that's the case? If so, then great. You already know the value of what I'm about to share. If not, then hopefully this will be helpful to you as you navigate turbulent waters in your life.

Remembering to actively worship Jesus in all circumstances can provide a wonderful sense of victory over troubles and inner peace for at least two reasons:

A. When we worship Him, it places our focus on Him, rather than on our problems.

And that can transform our thoughts and feelings.

Whatever we focus on greatly affects our emotional and spiritual health. For example, when I focus on my problems, I get a knot in the pit of my stomach. I find the frequency of my heartburn increases. I don't sleep as well as I should. I sometimes feel sad and defeated.

But when I choose (and it's a real battle to do so) to focus on God himself and the positive things God has brought into my life rather than what is going wrong, then I feel hopeful, even joyful.

I don't imagine I'm that much different than any of you in that regard, am I?

Scripture tells us that it is part of human nature for the focus of our thoughts to greatly affect us. Therefore, the Bible encourages us to control our thoughts, to renew our minds.

Paul exhorted the Corinthians to “...*take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.*” (II Cor. 10:5)

Similarly, Paul instructed the Romans to “...*be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*” (Rom. 12:2)

This is not about “the power of positive thinking.” This is about the positive power of praise!

Worship is a means of God’s grace to enable us to focus our thoughts on Jesus. And as we focus our thoughts on Jesus, we find a heavenly perspective on and relief from our problems.

In addition to placing our focus on Jesus rather than on our problems, there is another way in which worship and praise can provide inner peace and a sense of victory over troubles.

B. That way is the power of praise to transform us spiritually and strengthen our faith.

Worship and praise can transport us spiritually to a place above our problems. When we worship Jesus despite not feeling like it, despite hard times, it is an act of faith. Exercising faith in this way undoubtedly pleases God and he responds by strengthening us spiritually. Worshiping God is like fortifying ourselves with spiritual vitamins against exposure to the harmful germs of anxiety, discouragement, depression, and hopelessness.

Example of David:

David is perhaps the best Biblical example of someone who rose above his very real problems through praise. In the majority of David’s psalms, he complained to the Lord about his problems, usually his enemies. But in every case he interjected notes of praise that renewed his faith, strengthened his relationship with the Lord, and enabled him to move forward.

By the way, when I suggest we should praise God in the midst of our difficulties, I’m not saying we all have to break out our guitars and sing “Kumbaya.” There are many ways we can express worship and praise to God.

We can sing “a cappella” or we don’t have to sing out loud at all. We can worship silently as we listen to Christian music on our stereos or iPods. Or we can prayerfully praise and worship God in our quiet times without any musical accompaniment. Or we can utter short expressions of praise in prayer to God throughout the day, as we go about our business.

Example of Wendy:

Our good friend Wendy is a cheerful person who loves to worship. Wendy used to work for me. I remember one time when I was discouraged about business, Wendy offered a suggestion. She suggested I play some worship music there in the office to lift me out of my funk and help me to focus on God. I mumbled some kind of not-terribly-grateful response, and frankly I don’t recall if I did what she suggested or not. But, of course, she was right. I knew that because I had experienced worship’s transformative power myself at other times.

When we worship, the King comes.

Conclusion

To recap what we've covered...

On that first Palm Sunday almost 2,000 years ago, Jesus entered Jerusalem triumphantly as the Messiah and King who was worthy of all praise. He came to bring victory and peace to people held captive to sin.

At different points for each of us, Jesus has triumphantly entered our lives as the King who is worthy of all praise. He set each of us free from our captivity to sin but our problems haven't ceased.

Yet, we can continue to experience Christ's victory and peace in the midst of our problems. We can do that by living out the fact that he is King, in control of all our circumstances, bad as well as good.

And we can do that by engaging in the power of praise to change our focus and strengthen our faith.