

Palm Sunday: Jesus the King

March 29, 2029

Nelson Cathedral

OT Isa 50:4-9a

NT Phil 2:5-11

Gospel John 12: 12-33

Introduction

There is always a sense of expectation and excitement when we get the chance to meet our heroes. I can remember in 1989 when I went to the U2 concert at Lancaster Park in Christchurch. This was one of the biggest concerts NZ had ever seen. The excitement was certainly there and finally the band came on stage to the roar of the crowd.

As we come to Palm Sunday and begin the final week of Jesus' journey on the cross, we come to the point

where religious and political aspirations of the people combine.

This is the time of the Passover Festival, which recalls God's rescue of the Israel out of Egypt as the people followed Moses across the Red Sea. And during this festival, Jerusalem was packed with visitors.

We have often heard of popular hotspots in NZ where increased tourism has led to a strain on facilities. So it was for Jerusalem during this festival, when the normal population of around 50,000 more than doubled. There were so many people that thousands had to camp on the hills surrounding Jerusalem.

And as the population grew, so did the tension.

Arrival of the King

But in John's account something different was also happening as Jesus arrived.

You can imagine Jesus walking up the road to Jerusalem, passing all those who are camping out, and

the crowd growing as people join the procession. But there is one reason, one story that has been circulating for why the people were following Jesus.

This was the man who raised Lazarus from the dead. Of all the signs that John recorded, this was the event that made people believe in Jesus and this was the sign that scared the religious leaders the most because if the people tried to make Jesus their King, then the Romans would react with unyielding force.

And so, we come to the familiar scene of Palm Sunday as Jesus enters Jerusalem to the shouts of the people and the waving of palm branches. This would be like the parades we give to celebrate the winning of the America's Cup or the Rugby World Cup. But there is a difference, we would not have expected to make Sir Peter Blake or Richie McCaw Prime Minister.

As I have said, the spiritual and political now collide. The cries of "Hosanna", mean "save us now" as the people see in Jesus the person, possibly even the

promised Messiah, through whom God's empowering can save Israel once and for all.

But added to that cry are the words, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord", "Blessed is the King of Israel". How the people react by waving palm branches and rushing out to meet Jesus all symbolise their view that they are going to meet their conquering hero, their mighty king. Surely the one who raised Lazarus from the dead is the one who will save God's people – even by force if that is required.

What type of King.

In our geo-political landscape at the moment, leadership is all about power – who has the biggest army, who has more missiles...literally a childish game of "mine is bigger than yours".

The inference throughout this Palm Sunday scene is that Jesus is the true King who has come to set his people free. So, the question that is begging to be

asked is: “what type of King is Jesus?” There are three features of this account that answer this question.

1. The first is Jesus arriving on a Donkey not a warhorse or chariot. This fulfils the prophesy of Zechariah beginning with the worlds “do not be afraid” or as Matthew’s account states, “gentle and riding on a donkey”. Jesus as the true King, comes to bring peace not war – his gift is life as seen with Lazarus, not conquest with a body-count.
2. Second, hear Jesus’ description of his fate in being the seed that dies (v24) and being lifted up (v32) – statements that point to his death on a cross. At the festival when the Passover lamb is killed to take the sins of the people away, Jesus now becomes the Passover sacrifice once and for all. And after saying that he is the light of the world, Jesus is about to be lifted up on the cross –

a light lifted high for all to see as the ultimate sign of God’s love.

But rather than the people seeing the cross as a failure, John, through the words of Jesus and the voice of God, points to the cross in the opposite way – as the sign of his glorification as the true King.

As that great hymn in Philippians chapter 2 states, the cross is the true sign of Jesus’ self-sacrificial love for us. Jesus the true king who reigns for eternity is characterised by humility and obedience, not arrogance and deception.

3. Thirdly, we come to a scene which occurs in the temple grounds after Jesus has entered Jerusalem. Jesus talks with some non-Jews, God fearing Greeks who asked to see him. Now this is more than some polite conversation because as

we have already seen in the healing of the man born blind to “see” is more than physical sight, it means to see Jesus for who he really is, the Messiah, the King. To “see” Jesus means to be drawn by God’s love into a relationship with Jesus – it means becoming a follower of Jesus.

And now Jesus replies, “The hour has come” (v23). So far in John’s Gospel Jesus has continually said his time has not arrived. But now the purpose of his coming into the world and the scope of his Kingship is ready to be revealed. So, in speaking to these gentiles in the courts of the Jewish Temple, Jesus is pointing to his mission which is for all the world, for all people. Remember the words of John 3:16, “for God so loved the world...” and this is now confirmed in Jesus’ own words in verse 32, “But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself”.

Palm Sunday is not about the coming of the King for Israel, but it is about Jesus as King for us all which was God’s plan all along – to bring all people back into a relationship with him.

Our Response

As we reflect on our response to Palm Sunday this year there are two points I would like us to focus on.

1. The first is the growing trend of fitting Jesus into our expectations and our aspirations just as the crowds were trying to do. Just as it could have been on that first Palm Sunday, the name and person of Jesus could have been used for a violent uprising. Sadly, we see God’s name and Jesus’ name used to justify acts of violence in our world. But this journey to the cross reminds us that as the true King, Jesus asks us to follow him – not the other way around.

2. Second, we come to our response, not like the crowds but like the Greeks who asked to see Jesus. The seed that dies points first to Jesus' sacrifice. But it also points to us as we place our lives in his hands and die to self – taking up our cross daily and following him.

John 12:24 is the verse that led me to change direction from a career in science to full time ministry. When Lee-ann and I were needing to seek God's leading the most, I asked God, "what about the last 13 years training as a scientist and working at Auckland University. Was all that a waste of time".

And the verse God led me to was, "I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds."

These words assured me that those years were not a waste of time, but in them I also felt God was leading me to a different path. That was my calling, and God gives us all a calling, so the challenge is where is God leading you? This may involve putting aside or dying like the seed, all the while trusting in God's promise of life and fruitfulness. And we take those steps, holding to the words of Jesus, that, "whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant will be also.

Conclusion.

We often refer to Palm Sunday as the "Triumphal Entry", which is true, but it is not triumphal in the way those who gathered to glorify Jesus with shouts and palm branches realised. His victory will be of a different kind and his glory will be achieved by a completely different path as Jesus is "lifted up".

As NT Wright states, “That is how the world would be rescued. That’s how God, the true God, the God of astonishing and generous love would be glorified.

Swords, [and we might add guns and bombs] don’t glorify the creator- God. Love does. Self-giving love best of all.

May that be our path to follow as we shout “Hosanna” in glory of our King.

Amen.