

“NOTHING IS AS IT SEEMS”

John 12:12-36

When you travel round to other churches, you often find bits of furniture and other items in the church that have little brass plaques on them, reminding anyone who cares to look further that this clock was given to the church in 1947 by Mrs Evans in memory of her dear departed husband, Church Treasurer for thirty-five years; or that this lectern was provided by a grateful congregation in 1932 to mark sixty years of devoted ministry by the Revd George Jones. In some churches, pretty well everything has been donated to remember someone or other and the largest single item on the church's annual budget is Duraglit. At Oak Hill Theological College where I spent three years of my life struggling to learn Hebrew and remember the kings of Israel and Judah in the right order (failed on both counts), the pulpit in the chapel had a brass plaque on it. It was just a small one and was screwed to the lectern bit of it so only the preacher could see it. It didn't commemorate any benefactor or erstwhile college worthy. It had on it just five words – five words taken from the passage we've just read: “*Sir, we would see Jesus*”. It was a reminder to the person standing there that the congregation were waiting to be led by him (nearly always a him) into an encounter with Jesus.

Those words (very slightly expanded in the version from which we read this morning) are the hinge, really, of the passage we've just read, the fulcrum around which the rest seems to balance. What we read in the first part of the story is kind of subverted in the second part. This is a passage full of paradox, in which things are not quite as they seem to start with. There is a great sense of irony in the way the words and actions of the first part actually turn out in the second part. John gives us one or two clues – as we shall see – but they are written with hindsight and probably even John could not have realised at the time the events took place quite what their significance was.

It's the Palm Sunday story – as you've already worked out, and as you'd expect to be read today. It's a story we're very familiar with through having heard it every year for however many years we've been coming to church and having sung about it in hymns and songs over the years too. And we know the basics about it. Here is Jesus, at the end of his journey down from Galilee to Jerusalem, arriving at the beginning of the week of celebrations for the Passover. It's a time when the people of Israel are most fiercely nationalistic, remembering their liberation from Egypt many centuries before and their beginnings as a nation – a nation set apart by God and blessed by him. With the Romans occupying their country and rulers who were Jewish in little other than name, it was a time to look back to the escape they had from slavery and a hopeful look forward to the time when God would send his servant, the kingly Messiah, to liberate them once again from foreign rule and lead them into the bright future which they believed God had in store for them. The atmosphere would have been very much like it is in, for example, Northern Ireland when the nationalists, the republicans are demonstrating.

And Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, a city alive with this ferment of religious and nationalistic fervour as people once again hope that the promised Messiah might make an appearance this year. After all, tradition had it that the Messiah would arrive during the Passover celebrations. The group of people who have travelled down from Galilee with Jesus and those who have joined the group on the way, have a feeling that Jesus is the special one promised by God and they're looking to him to overthrow the Roman rule and lead them into a new period of liberty as the warrior king. So they start cheering and whooping it up as they enter the city, with Jesus riding along on a donkey as they wave palm branches in a show of support and triumph.

And, of course, a crowd attracts a crowd. The city is already thronged with excited pilgrims and they too take up the theme of praise – even though many of them probably have no idea who this person on the donkey is. But the group around Jesus are shouting lines from the Psalms which are generally considered to be looking forward to the coming of the Messiah, so their level of expectation increases, as does their acclamation and adulation. The crowds see Jesus, but not necessarily as he wants to be seen. Then these Greeks – probably Greek-speaking God-fearing Gentiles who are in the city to take part in the Passover celebrations – ask to see Jesus and what happens after that is used by John to explain what it really means

to see Jesus. John actually gives us a clue that you need to think carefully about all this in v16. Even the disciples couldn't really see what was going on here – and it didn't make sense to them until after Jesus had left them and returned to heaven.

The first irony in all this is that the crowds see Jesus as liberator, as someone who will free them from foreign occupation and reign as their king. They call out to him as the “*King of Israel*” and use these words from *Psalms 118* which are specifically interpreted as Messianic. The palm branches are used very much in the tradition of the Maccabees who had years earlier been instrumental in liberating Israel from foreign occupation under some of the Greek adventurers in the period between the Old and New Testaments. And they cry out “*Hosanna!*”, a word which means “*Save us now!*” Now, they may not necessarily have realised the full import of that word, as it was widely used in all kinds of contexts – a bit like, perhaps, when we say “*Goodbye*” without really understanding or meaning it as “*God be with you*”.

The paradox is that Jesus *will* save them – but not as they really want or expect. As we see in earlier episodes in his life, Jesus firmly rejects the idea that he should be their king. And he is implacably opposed to using force and violence as a means to an end. Jesus is not to be the one who will liberate his native people from foreign occupation, or bring his own religious community back to the way they used to be. But in the later part of this chapter, after the Greeks have arrived on the scene, we read that Jesus will liberate humanity from the oppression of sin and the prospect of judgement. He will “*drive out the prince of this world*” (v31) and so free all people from the yoke of evil. His death will be for the salvation of the world. Remember Matthew tells us that that's what his name actually means. Which really leads us into the second paradox, as the words of the people in Jerusalem are fulfilled, but in a way they don't expect.

Hovering around on the edge of the crowds, as always, are the Pharisees. These were the self-appointed guardians of religious and moral uprightness. They had a fairly cosy relationship with the establishment in many ways, but were also very keen to ensure that all the Jews got back to keeping the Law of Moses, the Torah, as they believed a Messiah would not appear until everyone was keeping Torah. Jesus was not flavour of the month with them and they'd had all kinds of run-ins with him up in Galilee and on the journey south. They didn't like him – and they certainly didn't like the popularity he seemed to be enjoying, which was quite different from the support that they were able to raise.

And as they stand scowling and muttering on the edge of this joyful crowd, one of them says to the others, “*Look how the whole world has gone after him*”. It's a bit like our expression, “the world and his wife”. Everyone seems to have been taken in by this man, they think. For them, of course, the world is the whole Jewish people. But immediately after this, after the Pharisees have been complaining about his wide appeal and after the crowd themselves have been hailing him as “*the King of Israel*”, the first people to approach him are these Greeks. As I said earlier, these were probably not necessarily ethnic Greeks, but Greek-speaking Gentiles. Whatever they were, they certainly weren't Jews.

They ask to see Jesus. They come seeking him. This really is “*the whole world going after him*”. And Jesus makes it clear, again in vv31,32, that his looming death is going to be for the whole world, for all men. His roots may have been in a particular nation at a particular time – after all, as a human being he had to be born somewhere at some point in history – but his mission is to the whole world. The Pharisees spoke unwitting words of prophecy when they said the whole world was going after Jesus. Although, in fact, the truth was that Jesus was going after the whole world, seeking all men and women who were under the power of “*the prince of this world*” – the Devil.

But the eyes of the people that day – whether they were for Jesus or opposed to him – seemed to see a hero and a victor. The shouts of joy and acclamation, the words of the Messianic Psalms, the symbolic waving of the palm branches – it all gave the impression of someone who was being glorified and feted. He was being given praise and glory in the fervent expectation of national liberation. And here is perhaps the biggest paradox of them all. Jesus' glory would not be seen in the praise and glory of the world. It would not be in the triumph of a ride into Jerusalem, feted by adoring crowds and cheering supporters that

Jesus' glory would be most clearly apparent. If Jesus was truly human (and he was – don't get me wrong), he would be lapping up this adulation. All he had to do on Palm Sunday was ride into the city and people would praise him and glorify him.

But what was going to happen would seem to be the opposite. Jesus' true glory would come in his ignominious death – a death which would take place away from the crowds, as he was nailed up on a rough wooden cross with a couple of criminals, outside the gates of the city, with a bunch of bored soldiers and a small handful of very close friends around him. It would be the most humiliating and glory-less death you could imagine. And it was a death Jesus really wanted to avoid – look at what he says in v27, words later echoed in his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane.

But it was after he'd come into Jerusalem, as he got down off the donkey and heard of the request of the Greeks – almost certainly away from the adoring crowds – that Jesus actually said "*The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified*". And he goes on to say that such glory can only come through death and sacrifice. The important thing for him – and for God and for us – is not the glory of the world (great as that can be) but the glory that he brings to God through his death on the cross.

And John is saying here – through the things he puts in v16 – that when you look back on this episode, pretty well everything that you think is going on turns out to be something different. The whole thing is subverted by the amazing sacrificial death of Jesus. It's only afterwards that you can really see the true extent of Jesus' actions and the true goal of his mission.

That's the Jesus we are called to follow. We've begun to see in our journey through Matthew's Gospel what it really means to follow this Kingly Messiah. And here, once again, we get a glimpse of what it's all about. Yes, it's great to climb on the bandwagon of triumphant praise and look forward to the eventual completion of the victory of Jesus over the forces of evil. That's *March For Jesus* and the heady triumphalism that overtakes the Church every now and then. There's nothing particularly wrong with that – and we are called to grab hold of and proclaim the victory that is ours in Jesus. I'm sure we'll have a bit of that as we celebrate the resurrection next week – you can't get any victory greater than that. But we also need to remember that Jesus calls us to tread the path of sacrifice and humility. As we eschew the glory of the world, which usually turns out to be pretty hollow anyway, and serve Jesus through giving ourselves to him to be used as he sees fit – that's when the glory of God begins to be truly seen.

And, as Jesus discovered, that can be pretty scary. We'll remember that this week as we tread the path of Holy Week, the path of Gethsemane and the way of the cross. If we really commit ourselves to following Jesus through such darkness, then that can really make life difficult for us in the short term. But look at what Jesus himself says in these verses:

"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honour the one who serves me."

It's a tough call. But the great paradox for us is that if we are prepared to give up everything for Jesus now, then we will eventually join him in enjoying everything in the future – an eternal future spent with God that makes the glory of this world seem utterly pathetic. Are you prepared to follow the way of Jesus? Are you ready to live as he calls you to? Because if you do, you won't get a brass plaque on a bit of church furniture, but you'll get to see Jesus – and to live life to the full now and for all eternity.

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This Palm Sunday story – with which we are probably very familiar – is full of irony. John actually gives us a clue that you need to think carefully about all this in *v16*. Even the disciples couldn't really see what was going on here – and it didn't make sense to them until after Jesus had left them and returned to heaven.

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The paradox is that Jesus **will** save them – but not as they really want or expect. Jesus will liberate humanity from the oppression of sin and the prospect of judgement. He will "*drive out the prince of this world*" (*v31*) and so free all people from the yoke of evil. His death will be for the salvation of the world.

Secondly, as the Pharisees stand scowling and muttering on the edge of this joyful crowd, one of them says to the others, "*Look how the whole world has gone after him*". But immediately after this, after the Pharisees have been complaining about his wide appeal and after the crowd themselves have been hailing him as "*the King of Israel*"; the first people to approach him are Greek-speaking Gentiles. This really is "*the whole world going after him*". And Jesus makes it clear, again in *vv31,32*, that his looming death is going to be for the whole world, for all men.

Thirdly, Jesus was being given praise and glory in the fervent expectation of national liberation. And here is perhaps the biggest paradox of them all. But Jesus' glory would not be seen in the praise and glory of the world. What was going to happen would seem to be the opposite. Jesus' true glory would come in his ignominious death – the most humiliating and glory-less death you could imagine. It was after he'd come into Jerusalem, as he got down off the donkey and heard of the request of the Greeks – almost certainly away from the adoring crowds – that Jesus actually said "*The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified*". And he goes on to say that such glory can only come through death and sacrifice. The important thing for him – and for God and for us – is not the glory of the world (great as that can be) but the glory that he brings to God through his death on the cross.

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Questions for discussion

1. Which part of the Palm Sunday story particularly appeals to you? Why?
2. Why was Jesus so reluctant to become King of Israel? Why do you think he was prepared to enter Jerusalem in triumph despite that?
3. What does Jesus mean by *v23*?
4. What does it mean that "*the prince of this world will be driven out*"? How will that happen? What difference will it make?
5. How do you commemorate Holy Week? Do you find it a helpful time?