

The Triumphal Entry

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[0 : 0 0] We all love a parade. Well, that in itself is a rather presumptuous statement to make. Maybe we don't all love a parade, but imagine most of us love a parade. I want you to imagine this sequence of events. Some of you will find them attractive, some of you a lot less so. But it's the last day of the season, and Celtic are two points clear of Aberdeen coming into the final game of the season. The two title contenders. Halftime, Celtic are winning 2-0. It all seems to be wrapped up.

But then, in drama of an unprecedented nature, Aberdeen score three goals in the second half and turn the game around, win 3-2, and win the championship. The following day, an open-top bus parade along Union Street, and thousands gather to bathe the victorious team in adulation. And then you wake up. Well, today is Palm Sunday, and we remember what we might call a parade into Jerusalem. Not on an open-top bus, but on a donkey. Now, how bizarre is that? We're so familiar with the account that we maybe lose a sense of how strange it is because of familiarity. And just to remind ourselves of the events that led to this, or on the very day, on that first Palm Sunday, there was a growing level of feverish excitement among the gathering crowds. We can detect that in what we've read, and indeed in the parallel accounts that we have in each of the Gospels. And we're given some explanation as to why there was this level of excitement. The crowds had heard of what had happened in Bethany. They'd heard of how Lazarus, who had been dead and buried, had been raised from death by this man Jesus. And this man Jesus was now, they were told, approaching Jerusalem. Some, of course, were accompanying him on that walk into Jerusalem. Others heard of his approach and gathered to form part of this growing crowd. And many of them, as we read, they cut palm branches and they wave them in the air as they come out to meet the one who raises the dead to life. Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the name of the Lord. Blessed is the King of Israel, was their cry of adulation, their cry of praise.

And then Jesus does something just a little strange. He takes a little donkey who, as we know from the other accounts, he had sent his disciples to secure for him. And he sits on the donkey and he rides into Jerusalem. We're familiar with the account, but do you understand what's going on? Do you understand the meaning of this? What does it all mean? If you don't understand, then you're in good company.

Because as we read in verse 16, that was the situation of the disciples. At first, his disciples did not understand all this. As they participated in this very event, they didn't understand what it was all about. And as we acknowledge that reality that John acknowledges, that's going to serve as our structure really for considering the passage before us. And there's really three questions that we want to pose and endeavor to answer. And the first question is, what did the disciples not understand? John states it very clearly that they didn't understand? But what was it that they didn't understand? That's the first task that we want to confront, answering that question. What did they not understand? But then the second question is, what did the disciples after realize? And then I'm using the very language of the verse. After they realized. What was it that they after realized?

But then the third question, which in many ways is the most intriguing one, is what made the difference? Why is it that before they didn't understand, but after they do understand? Something must have happened that would explain this progression, this development from ignorance to understanding, from confusion to clarity. What is it? And I think John gives us a hint, more than a hint, as to what the answer to that question is. So that's the task before us, these three questions that we've posed, and we'll now try and answer. What did the disciples not understand? Well, verse 16 tells us that first the disciples, that first the disciples, or his disciples did not understand all this.

[5 : 28] All this. That's what they didn't understand. But what does all this refer to? Well, it seems to me that it refers to two things. It refers to the praise of the crowds that has just been recorded for us by John, and it refers also to the response of Jesus, how Jesus responds to that praise. These are the two central elements of what's happening, and these are the things that the disciples don't understand.

These are the things encompassed within the all this that John speaks of. And let's think of these two elements. First of all, the praise of the crowds that the disciples don't understand.

Now, when we ponder, we just pause for a moment and ask ourselves, well, what's going on here? Is this not a little strange? Is John really saying that the disciples, including himself, understood less than the crowds what was going on? Is that what he's saying? Is that the crowds understand because they're praising Jesus in a very appropriate way, but the disciples don't understand? That seems difficult to imagine that that was what is happening. I think it's rather the case that neither the crowds nor the disciples understood their own praise, because we can be sure that the disciples were also joining in this praise. They weren't simply observing what was going on. They were participants.

And so together with the crowds, they don't really understand what it is that they're saying, or the significance of what they're saying. They didn't understand the meaning, the significance of the words they were using. They didn't understand who Jesus was and what he had come to Jerusalem to do.

And so they used words that were in themselves altogether fitting, and yet misunderstood by those employing them, the crowds, and indeed even the disciples who form part of this festive gathering.

[7 : 39] Well, what are the words that they employ, but they don't really understand? Well, the first one that we're given by John is this exclamation of praise, Hosanna. But I imagine that part of the confusion for the disciples was, well, why is Jesus to be praised? We're participating, we're joining in, but why is it that we're doing it? I wonder what they had in mind as an explanation. The passage gives us a clue. It is in the context of the resurrection of Lazarus. Are the crowds and the disciples also praising Jesus as this amazing miracle worker who can raise the dead? You might think, well, that's a good reason to praise a man. Are they praising Jesus because they see him as the one who would save them from Roman oppression? The very word, Hosanna, though it had evolved into meaning a general exclamation of praise. It actually means save now. And so do they have this in their minds that this is the one who will save us from the Romans if he can raise the dead? Well, surely he has the power to free us from the yoke of a Rome. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. These are other words that the crowds employ, and they're words that come from the book of Psalms, from Psalm 118. And the crowds would have known, or certainly some of those within the crowd would have known that these words spoke of becoming Messiah. And yet, even though there was that level of understanding, they misunderstood.

And that's really the equivalent to not understanding the nature of Jesus' Messiahship. So even though there was an element of understanding that this man is in some way the Messiah, the promised Messiah, the one who would come in the name of the Lord, they don't grasp the nature of that Messiahship.

But then we're also told by John that they use these words, blessed is the king of Israel. Of course, these words prove, if you wish, that the crowds in a measure do understand the words of Psalm 118 as speaking of a coming king or Messiah. It's almost as if this third expression is an interpretation of the second. The crowd are revealing that they do know what they mean when they recognize Jesus as the one who comes in the name of the Lord. It means that he's the king. It means that he's the promised Messiah. And so there's a measure of understanding, even as we compare and contrast the words that they use. And that's good. As far as it goes, that is good. But again, their problem is to do with their conception of kingship. The crowds have decided what kind of king they want. They've decided what kind of Jesus they want. They want a king and they want a Jesus who will meet their felt needs, who will answer them at the point of what they consider to be their need. They want somebody who can perform miracles, who can heal their sick, who can raise their dead. Yes, they want that kind of king. That kind of Jesus is appealing to them.

They want a king. They want a king. They want a king who will overthrow the Roman yoke. That's the kind of king they want. And so they praise him and they adulate him and they welcome him because that's the kind of king they're looking for and hope that he is and will prove to be. They praise a Jesus in many ways of their own creation. We maybe should just pause there for a moment and recognize that this is something where we need to take great care because there's a real danger that we can do the same. We create a Jesus after our own image, the Jesus that we want, that does the things that we want him to do, that fits into the mold that we determine. This was the mistake that these crowds were making. But Jesus is not one for us to determine who he is. He determines who he is and he reveals who he is and we have to deal with him for who he is and not for who we would like him to be. And of course, in all of this praise that is directed to Jesus or around Jesus in any case, the disciples, as John tells us, they just don't understand all this. But it's also true that they don't understand the response of Jesus to the praise.

How does he respond? Well, he does receive their praise. And this is important. Even though the crowd profoundly misunderstands who he is and what he has come to do, Jesus still receives their praise.

[13:10] He acknowledges himself to be worthy of praise, even if in this case it is misunderstood praise. But he does something else, something strange, something incongruous. He takes a donkey's colt, a little donkey, and he sits on that donkey, and he rides into Jerusalem. What a strange king. This is one who has been acknowledged by the crowds as the king of Israel. And yet here he is riding on a donkey.

You would have imagined that a battle horse would have been more fitting, more dignified, more inspiring. As I was trying to picture the scene as it's played out before us. What came to mind was, I imagine a couple of Roman soldiers passing by and witnessing the events. And they hear the cry of the crowds, blessed be the king of Israel. And they think, oh, what's this about, king of Israel?

And then they look. Who is this man? Being lord is as the king of Israel. And so these two soldiers, they look and they see Jesus on a donkey. And one of the soldiers turns to his friend and he goes, ooh, scary. And they laugh mockingly. This is the king of Israel. This is the king of Israel where we don't have much to worry about. But the disciples, they don't understand. That's what Jesus says.

We have, of course, the advantage of John's explanatory note in verses 14 and 15, where he identifies that what Jesus did was in fulfillment of prophecy. But of course, John adds this explanation after the event when he's recording at what happened. At the time, the disciples had no notion that Jesus was riding on a donkey in fulfillment of prophecy. John didn't turn to Peter when Jesus got on the donkey and said, ah, of course, Zechariah 9. That's what's happening here. No, they didn't understand either what was going on. The disciples were as bemused as the crowds. Now, it's true. It's evident from what we read that Jesus' response, strange though it was, doesn't appear to have dampened the enthusiasm of the crowd, but it was perplexing all the same. What about us? What about you as you are witness to these events? Can you sympathize with the disciples, with the crowds? Perhaps you feel, in a way, drawn to

Jesus, but you don't really understand all this. Who actually is he? What has he come to do? What has he done? What can he do for me? So this, in answer to the question, what was it that the disciples didn't understand? But then the next question that we posed was, what did the disciples after realize?

[16 : 28] And as I've already noted, using there the very language that John uses in verse 16, 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 so on. Well, what they after realize is, not surprisingly, what they before didn't understand, namely the praise of the crowds and the response of Jesus. If we begin with the praise of the crowds. After they understood that Hosanna was praise fittingly directed to their Savior, after they understood Jesus as the promised and sufficient Savior. And as they understood him to be that Savior, so they looked back on that day and said, ah, yes, what fitting praise to direct to Jesus? After they understood. After they understood that Jesus was indeed the one who had come from heaven in the name of the Lord. That he was the Lord. That he fulfilled the words of Psalm 118, from which the words are taken and employed by the crowds. Let's just remind ourselves of what is said there in that part of the Psalm. Psalm 118, and from verse 25. And what do we read there? Psalm 118, from verse 25. Oh Lord, save us, or Hosanna. Oh Lord, grant us success. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. From the house of the Lord we bless you. The Lord is God, and he has made his light shine upon us with bows in the name of the Lord. They understood in the name of the Lord. They understood in the light of this psalm. They understood that Jesus is the one by whom God has made his light shine upon us.

They understood not only that Jesus was king, but what kind of king. And then that brings us, of course, to how they also understood the response of Jesus to the praise of the crowds. After they understood that these things had been written about him. They understood both that Jesus, in riding on a donkey, was fulfilling Zechariah's prophecy. That they certainly understood. John certainly did. He tells us.

But more importantly, they understood what that revealed about the nature of Jesus' kingship. And here too, we would do well just to remind ourselves of what it is that Zechariah said.

In Zechariah chapter 9, and reading verses 9 and 10. Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion. Shout, daughter of Jerusalem. See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the war horses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken.

He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the river to the ends of the earth. They understand, in the light of this prophecy, that Jesus is their king, that Jesus is their righteous one, that Jesus is their savior, that Jesus is the gentle king. Maybe very especially the words of Zechariah are words that are understood as they remember Jesus riding on a donkey, their gentle king.

[20 : 33] They understand that Jesus is the king. They understand that Jesus is the king who will conquer not by military might, but by proclaiming peace to the nations. They understand that Jesus is the king whose rule will extend from sea to sea. This is what the disciples after realize. But then that takes us to our third question, and in some ways the most interesting of the three, we can identify what they didn't understand before. We can identify, at least in some measure, or suggest what we imagine that they did understand after. But what made the difference?

Why the change? What happened? Well, John tells us. He gives us a very important, clue in answering that question, because in verse 16 he says this, 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 done these things to him. And occupying a pivotal place in this verse is this word glorified. It's not simply a time marker. It's not simply that John is saying, well, before this happened, whatever it is, they didn't understand, and after this happened, whatever it is, they did understand.

So marking, dividing time in these two chapters, it's more than a marker of time. The word serves to give us a clue as to how they came to understand. It was through Jesus being glorified that understanding was brought to them. This was the key. In the light of Jesus being glorified, and in a moment we'll think, well, what does that mean? But in the light of Jesus being glorified, they could look back at the events of that day and say, now we understand. And to think about the significance then of Jesus being glorified, and the explanatory power of Jesus being glorified, we need to pose a couple of additional questions.

The first one is a very simple one, and it's, what is John talking about? What is he referring to when he speaks of Jesus being glorified? Is there a particular event that he has in mind? What is that about?

But then the second question is, how does this, whatever it is, and we'll see in a moment what it is, how does it reveal or explain the triumphal entry? How does it explain all this that previously they hadn't understood? Firstly then, what does glorified mean? What does it refer to as used here by John?

[23 : 39] Well, the word is a word that has a dictionary definition, if you wish. We could define it in isolation. And to glorify, it means to make known the greatness of somebody. In the context of the Bible, that would ordinarily be God, to make known the greatness of God. Though the word can be used of others, of men, of a king, whoever. And in a sense, that is what the crowd were doing, curiously, almost you might say ironically. The crowd were glorifying Jesus in a measure. They were making known his greatness. But there is a specific use of the word, as on this occasion, and that use the word is not hard to find. It's not hard to find because in the immediately following verses, Jesus himself uses the word in a very particular way. Turn with me to verses 23 and 24 of this same chapter. John 12, verses 23 and 24. And listen to what Jesus says. Jesus replied,

The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth. 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.

It couldn't be clearer. Jesus himself is giving us the explanation to what this word glorified means. And it's evident that when John used it in the previous verse, he would have used it in the sense that Jesus uses it here. It means, and it refers to, Jesus' death. The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. And indeed, he goes on speaking of a seed having to die in order to produce fruit. It is so crystal clear. The word is being used to speak very particularly of the death of Jesus.

And of course, that in itself would open up the door to thinking very profitably about how is it that the death of Jesus makes known his greatness? That's not our task this morning. But of course, it is true that the death of Jesus is the great proclamation of the greatness of Jesus. It declares his great love. It declares his great compassion. It declares his great justice and holiness. And we could go on. But this word glorified, though it very particularly has a reference to his death, it goes beyond his death. It also points to what follows. Indeed, in the very manner in which Jesus uses it there in verses 23 and 24, the seed that he speaks of doesn't only die, the seed then produces fruit. And so that points, Jesus himself, pointing beyond his death to his resurrection. Jesus is glorified in his death, in his resurrection, in his ascension, in his sending of his Spirit at Pentecost. All of these events together constitute Jesus' events together constitute Jesus' glorification, but very particularly his death. And that leads us to our second question. How does Jesus being glorified, how does Jesus dying on the cross reveal or explain the triumphal entry, all this? Well, the big truth is that Jesus being glorified,

Jesus being crucified, reveals him to be king. Now, that's a strange thing to declare. And yet, listen to what Jesus himself says in this regard. Just a few verses on in verse 32 of the same chapter, as he looks forward to his imminent death. He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.

[27 : 54] Jesus uses language that I think is deliberately ambiguous when he speaks of being lifted up. It's very clear that the reference is a reference to his physical death. He says that. Or John adds that explanation. He said this in order to explain the manner of death that he was going to experience. So, to be crucified, you needed to be lifted up onto the cross. And so, it has that sense, that perhaps primary or maybe obvious a sense of being lifted up. But the language that Jesus uses, this language of being lifted up, also hints at this lifting up being a kind of exaltation. We might even say enthronement.

There is a sense, a shocking sense, in which the cross is his throne. It is on the cross, that he is supremely revealed to be the king of his people, rescuing his people from slavery and from oppression. But we can delve a little more into how his being glorified explains the events of Palm Sunday. How in particular, it explains the nature of his kingship, which is the very thing the crowds didn't get. It's the very thing the disciples didn't understand, the nature of his kingship.

They acknowledged him to be king, but they didn't understand the nature of his kingship. How does his being glorified throw light or cast light onto the events of Palm Sunday?

Well, it casts light in this regard, that it reveals him to be a king, yes, but he's the king of peace. The crowds wanted a king who would conquer, not a king on a cross. They wanted a king of war.

That's what kings do. They kill. They liberate. They defeat the enemy. That's the kind of king they wanted, not a king of peace. But Jesus is the king of peace. He came into Jerusalem riding, not on a battle horse, but on a donkey. He gave over his own life to death. He did not come to kill, but to be killed. And by his death, he secured your peace, peace with God, and peace in your own soul.

[30 : 30] But his being glorified also sheds light on his kingship in identifying him as the king of life. As Jesus said, as he was explaining really his very use of the word, that he was to be glorified, the seed dies, that it might produce many seeds. The one who died rose triumphant from the grave.

He is the king who conquered death. He is the king of life. And he is the king who gives life, resurrection life to all his subjects, to all who belong to his kingdom, to all who become part of his kingdom as they place their trust in him as their king and as their savior and as their lord.

But his being glorified also sheds light on the triumphal entry by identifying him as the king of all.

In verse 32 that we noted a moment ago when we were commenting on this language of Jesus being lifted up, Jesus then goes on to declare that he is lifted up with a saving purpose, that he might, to use his own words, draw all men to himself.

When I read these words of Jesus and when we look back to the account that John has given us of the triumphal entry, I wonder, and I can't do more than wonder, but I wonder if John intends us to detect an ironic echo in the words of Jesus to the words of the Pharisees that John recorded for us at the end of verse 19. The Pharisees, in their frustration at Jesus' popularity, what do they say? Look how the whole world has gone after him. Now, of course, that was hyperbole. The whole world wasn't going after him, but in their frustration they described the events in those ways. And yet, there is a very real sense in which Jesus was lifted up that the whole world might go after him, that he might draw all men to himself. He is the king of all who come to him and trust in him and acknowledge him to be who he is, the eternal son of God, became flesh, who dwelt among us and handed over his life as a sacrifice for sin, for sinners, for you and me. Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the king of Israel. John acknowledges very humbly and very honestly that he, together with his fellow disciples, did not understand what was going on. Do you understand? Do you understand that Jesus is the king who rode triumphantly on a donkey and his destination was the cross? Do you understand that he is the king who was crucified on his bloody throne? Do you understand and acknowledge him to be the king of peace, the king who has secured your peace? Do you acknowledge him to be the king of life?

[34 : 01] Yes, he died, but in dying he conquered death and rose again triumphant and that resurrection life is life that he offers and shares with all who trust in him. Do you acknowledge him to be the king of all?

The one who was lifted up that he might draw all men to himself. And we close with that thought. Is he drawing you? Is he drawing you today? Will you come and bow before him and embrace him as your gentle king?

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your son. We thank you for the gospel of God as it's made evident in the person of your son, Jesus Christ. We thank you for who he is. We thank you for what he has done. We thank you for the manner in which on the grounds of all that he has done, so even today he draws men and women, boys and girls to himself as we're brought to see him and as we're brought to acknowledge our need of him and as we're enabled to put our trust in him. We pray that by your spirit you would be doing that work amongst us and in us even now and even today. And these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.