



## Sermon

Date

### ***The Triumphal Entry***

**Ps 118:1-2, 19-29; John 12:12-16**

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Imagine it! Two and a half to three million people coming from all round Israel and other parts of the world to celebrate the Passover, as they did every year.

But this year was different. There were crazy reports being passed on, spreading faster than Twitter or Instagram, about the wonderful Rabbi who had actually raised a man called Lazarus from the dead. A common Jewish belief of the time was that after a man had been in the grave for 3 days, by then the spirit of the man had truly departed. Maybe that is why Jesus had waited for three days before coming to raise Lazarus from the dead, but anyway, that Lazarus who had died and been buried was now alive and many people had witnessed his return to life.

I once received a belated birthday card from a forgetful friend, which depicted Lazarus apologising to his friend whose birthday he had missed, "It's true, I tell you, true! I was dead and now I'm alive!" Great excuse!

So a city set on a hill and a huge crowd agog to see the Rabbi from Nazareth, set the scene for Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the "City of Peace."

The triumphal entry. ... Huge numbers of people welcomed him into the city with joy. He was riding, not just on a donkey, not just on a wave of popularity with adoring and cheering fans, he was riding as a deliberate prophetic statement. In the parallel passage in the Gospel of Matthew, Matthew reaches back into the Old Testament and pulls out a paragraph from the prophet Zechariah:

*"Rejoice, O people of Zion! Shout in triumph, O people of Jerusalem! Look, your king is coming to you. He is righteous and victorious, yet he is humble, riding on a donkey— riding on a donkey's colt. (9:9)*

And John tells us,

*"Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, as it is written in the prophecy of Zechariah:*

<sup>15</sup> *"Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt."*

Zechariah's name means, "God remembers." He began his prophetic writing in 520 BC, and around 550 years later, God had not forgotten and caused the prophecy to be fulfilled. So if you think God is taking rather a long time to fulfil his promise to you or to answer a prayer, think of Zechariah's name, "God remembers."

Here also, we find an incidence of a hardly-noticed miracle set inside a prophetic fulfilment. Mark, in his gospel account, specifically mentions a colt, the foal of a donkey. A colt would have been under 2 years old and unbroken, meaning it had never been ridden or trained to allow a rider to sit on it. Try doing *that* yourself! Or rather, **don't** try this at home! It was a miracle that Jesus was able to ride into Jerusalem without any of his bones being broken.

It's also interesting that while we might see a donkey as kind of a second-rate horse, for the people of Israel it was very symbolic, traditionally and culturally. A donkey was what a king rode when he came into a city in peace. A totally appropriate mount for the Prince of Peace. Totally appropriate for Zechariah's description of the righteous King. *"He is righteous and victorious, yet he is humble, riding on a donkey's colt."*

Righteousness is like the first part of a frame regarding Jesus' impending death, it's like the opening bracket at the beginning of a clause.

Righteousness means not only being morally and legally in the clear, but a greater scholar than I describes it as also being in right relationship to God and to other people. Jesus was the right man for the job and he was in right standing with God and man. "Right relationship to God" means he did not sin, he kept his loving, close relationship with God steadfastly, and he aligned himself with God's purposes. "Rightly relating to people" meant that Jesus served humankind, did not break trust in any way, and was the expression of God's heart to them, despite their weaknesses, stubbornness and vindictiveness.

So Jesus was righteous and victorious. Imagine "victorious" as the closing bracket, victorious over the temptations of self-interest etc, victorious over the high-level spiritual forces who conspired against him, and over the ultimate enemy, death. He showed righteousness beforehand, in his attitude towards those who persecuted him. The victory was displayed in his bodily resurrection from a grave. The grave had been sealed by the power and authority of the mightiest nation on earth. His victory was brightly shown by his refusal to sin, in word or deed, even when the strongest temptations were put before him. Righteous and victorious.

The circle made by those brackets can represent the stone that was rolled over the door of Jesus' tomb. Staring death in the face can turn the strongest amongst us into panic. The finality, the darkness, the unknown can strip us of our bravado. But Jesus conquered that creeping enemy of fear, emerging bright and shining, righteous and victorious from the battle with death. He lives in us, and we in him.

I once heard a man's verbal testimony of a near-death experience wherein he died of a heart attack. This was not a religious man, but as he died, he almost involuntarily found the words coming from his lips, "Jesus, forgive me." He found himself pulled towards another place and was standing near the edge of a chasm. He had not been a practicing Christian. He had not lived a righteous life, but a life of looking after Number 1. He believed not in Jesus, but in himself. He had lived to amass as much wealth as he could in the search for the good life.

As he curiously approached the edge of the chasm, he noticed smoke and the stench of burning arising from it and then a hideous monster-like thing emerged from the crack in the ground. It addressed him by name and said, "It's your time. You have to come with us."

In his horror and desperation, he did what he described later as the best thing he had ever done. He turned away from the figure and yelled out, "Jesus, Jesus, help me!" Immediately, he saw two specks of light from far in the black distance of space come swooping towards him and two large angels arrived in time to rescue him and take him to Jesus. I can show you where to find what happened next, the rest of the man's testimony.

I wonder what testimony Lazarus had about his three days in the grave!

Jesus has conquered the grave, and every force of hell. He is righteous and victorious. In the deepest pit you can experience, he has been lower and he has risen again.

Now the jewel that sits above the circle of righteousness and victory is Jesus' humility. It would have been spine-tingling to see and hear the surge of rapturous welcomers, rushing out the gates of Jerusalem, calling out, "Lord, be our saviour!" and "Blessed is the one sent to us from God!" It could have turned Jesus' head completely... The shouts **were** appropriate – and true.

But he did not let it swell his head. Jesus demonstrated grace and humility all his life and ministry, and particularly on that climactic day. He treated acclaim and scorn alike. They were far less important than his Father's purpose for him.

Seated on the donkey, the pressure was mounting for Jesus. He had to keep his eyes closely fixed on the path Father God was opening up before him. Step by step he obeyed, whatever people's opinion of him was. Step by step he refused the devil's way out, the attractive way of ease and self-gratification. Step by step he refused the temptation to grab earthly status and power, choosing instead the path of humility, the way of the cross. And this humility, like a beautiful jewel, shows in his offer to include us in his plans for eternity. He is now able to offer to his bride, the church, the beautiful promises of our future together with him, like an engagement ring.

Jesus set his face like flint as he deliberately set things in motion to approach the cross. To *“set his face like flint”* is a way of describing Jesus’ unwavering determination to persevere in the excruciating task set before Him.

He was able to set his face like flint because 1. He knew who he was and who his Father was. 2. He knew what his mission was, and 3. He had not allowed himself to be distracted or led into sin by his human passions.

This is a challenge to us as we follow Jesus. Firstly, have we discovered who we are and who our father God is? This can be found in the Bible, but in order for that knowledge to transform and empower us, it needs to be experienced, not just be an idea in our minds.

The second challenge is: do we have, as Jesus did, a clear understanding of what our mission is?

Thirdly, how are we responding to the attractions of worldly pleasures and human passions? Do we live our lives as if our personal comfort and gratification is the ultimate good?

I am not giving these challenges to you in order to confuse or frighten you, but to stimulate you to pray about them. It’s just that the pressures and pleasures of our 21<sup>st</sup> century world and the lies of our Western culture easily blind us to the things of God, the things of lasting and true value. Choices large and small either lead us towards God or away from his plan and desires for us. Let’s ask him to help us. We only have to ask.

Let us aim to follow Jesus, in the manner of St Paul as he wrote to the [church in Philippi](#):

*“Not that I have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of, that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”*

Finally, let’s be encouraged by what John writes about the disciples’ reaction to the events of the triumphal entry. In verse 16 of chapter 12, John writes, *“At first his disciples did not understand all this.”* But they kept going. Despite not understanding everything, they persevered, and the Lord helped them, as he will us. All we have to do is ask him.