

Easter (1988) - Triumph or Travesty?

by Mariano Di Gangi

Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on a donkey fulfills a prophecy of Zechariah and highlights his dependence on his followers and his need for their cooperation in fulfilling his purpose.

Duration: 28:43

Scripture: Matthew 21:1

Topics: "Easter"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the story of Jesus entering Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. The people are enthusiastic and proclaim Jesus as their candidate for king, expecting him to defeat the Romans and restore the Davidic monarchy. Jesus sends two disciples to fetch a donkey and its colt, fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah. The preacher emphasizes the importance of recognizing the Lord's needs and yielding ourselves to fulfill his purpose, using the hymn 'Take My Life and Let It Be' as an example of complete consecration to God.

Transcript

The passage of scripture for this Lord's Day morning is found in the 21st chapter of the gospel according to Matthew. Matthew 21, beginning to read at the first verse. Hear now the reading of this portion of God's written word.

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples saying 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. And if anyone says anything to you, tell him that the Lord needs them and he will send them right away.

And this took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet. 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. The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them.

They brought the donkey and the colt, placed their cloaks on them and Jesus sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The 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. When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, who is this? The crowds answered, this is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee. How many times have you heard sermons on this particular story? Some of you who are comparatively new Christians may have heard it two or three times.

Others may have heard it at least 40 or 50 or 60 Palm Sundays consecutively year by year. God forbid that because of over-familiarity with the story, we should today be dulled to its significance. When a pagan chieftain in Britain heard the gospel for the first time, he asked the missionary who had come to evangelize that pagan land, and if I accept your message, what will happen? And the answer was, you will see wonder upon wonder and every wonder true.

God forbid that we should become so over-familiar with the story of the first Palm Sunday, that we should be jaded to the tremendous truths about Jesus that are revealed in this passage of God's word. Here, we see Jesus. He is at the center of the whole story, and we must listen to what he says and to what he does.

The first thing that Jesus does in our text is to send his disciples on an errand. Jesus and his followers are approaching Jerusalem. He has set his face steadfast like a flint toward Jerusalem and he will not be deterred.

He comes to the Mount of Olives and he sends two of his disciples on in order to bring him a donkey and its colt. Now, let your imagination play with that for a while. Think of animals that had a prominent role in scripture meeting together and comparing notes.

Here is a dove. It had been on board Noah's Ark for 40 days and 40 nights, and then it went out to survey the landscape and came back with a palm leaf in its beak. And that dove would have had a story to tell.

Or what about that great fish, which in the midst of a storm at the command of God drew near to a ship where a fugitive prophet had been exposed as a fraud and then devoured him to deposit him on dry land to hear the word of God come to Jonah a second time. And the great fish would have its story to tell. What about those ravens who at the order of God, the Lord of Providence, came and fed the prophet Elijah in the midst of a national crisis? And they, too, would have something to relate.

But what about this donkey and his colt? Beasts of burden, privileged to bear him who is able to bear both us and all our burdens, who invites us to cast all our care upon him, confident that he does care for us. He sends his disciples on an errand. And in the biblical text, we have the report of the words of our Lord, which include a tremendous paradox.

I trust that you didn't let it slip by unnoticed in the reading. If anyone says anything to you, tell him that the Lord needs them and he will send them right away. Do you find anything strange in that combination? The Lord needs them? The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the earth, the world, and they that dwell therein.

For he has founded it upon the seas and established it upon the floods. And all there is belongs to the Christ who shared in creation, belongs to the Christ who shares in the providential ordering of the universe. It's all his.

He's got the whole world in his hands. And yet the text says the Lord needs them. John Calvin, more than any of the other reformers of the 16th century, stressed the biblical doctrine of the sovereignty of God.

And yet he also stressed that while God could do any number of things acting directly and immediately from heaven, his ordinary way of procedure is to be dependent on the likes of you and me and to involve us in his work and in his witness in the world. The Lord has need of a donkey and its colt. The Lord could do things directly.

The Lord could do things immediately. And yet he has use and he has need of the likes of you and me for the fulfillment of his purpose. And what a tremendous privilege it is to be an instrument in his hand and to be a means for the fulfillment of his purpose.

The Lord has need of us. And what sort of response will we make to him? It's easy to sing your way through a hymn of deep commitment because you're carried along by the lilt of the music. But what happens when words are divorced from music and the demands of discipleship stand alone? The Lord has need.

Will we recognize that and yield ourselves up to fulfill his purpose? Francis Ridley Havergill put it like this. Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee. Take my moments and my days and let them flow in ceaseless praise.

Take my hands and let them move with the impulse of thy love. Take my feet and let them be swift and beautiful for thee. Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold.

Take my intellect and use every power as thou shall choose. Take my will and make it thine. It shall be no longer mine.

Take my heart. It is thine own. It shall be thy royal throne.

Take my love, my Lord. I pour at thy feet its treasure store. Take myself and I will be ever only all for thee.

The Lord has need. The Lord would involve us in the fulfillment of his purpose. God grant that we may willingly put ourselves at his disposal.

So he sends his disciples on an errand. But the next thing that we notice in our text is that in so doing, he fulfills a prophecy of Zechariah. Zechariah's prophetic activity flourished according to the biblical data in the summer of the year 520 BC.

And his writings are filled with promises and prophecies that find fulfillment in the career of Jesus, the Messiah. For example, in the 11th chapter of the prophecy of Zechariah, you've got the story, the strange story of a shepherd and his flock. And the shepherd goes to the flock and says, pay me what you think I am worth.

And the flock, instead of answering, pay you what we think you are worth? Give you your severance pay? Not on your life. We can't do without you. You are absolutely indispensable to us.

You are the shepherd and the guardian of our souls. To whom else can we turn? No, the flock did not say that. The flock said, you want to know what we think you are worth? 30 pieces of silver.

The price of an injured slave, the price of a mutilated beast. That is the price at which Israel esteemed the value of Jesus. That is the price at which Judah struck a bargain and handed him over.

Zechariah had predicted it. And so it came to pass, not for 29 nor for 31, but 30 pieces of silver. Or take that passage in Zechariah 12.

They shall look upon him whom they have pierced and they shall mourn because of him. And the apostle John, seeing the Roman soldier take his spear and thrust it into the Savior's side, so that water and blood poured forth, related this event to what is found in Zechariah 12. They shall look on him whom they have pierced and they shall mourn because of him.

Or the passage at the beginning of Zechariah 13. In that day, there shall be opened a fountain for sin and for uncleanness in the city of David. And that fount we know has been opened.

The blood of Jesus Christ, God's son, cleanses us from all sin. But here there was yet another prophecy of Zechariah to be fulfilled, and it's the one that is found in Zechariah 9, verses 9 and 10. Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion.

Shout, daughter of Jerusalem. See, your king comes to you righteous and having saved you. He comes to you in 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.

This prophecy of Zechariah waited for 520 or more years, and finally it matured into history, and this meant a great deal to the early church. For in writing to Christians who might have been shaken in their convictions, the Apostle Peter in his second letter says, we've got a firm foundation for our faith, because on the one hand you can rest on the apostolic witness. We were eyewitnesses of the things that we're telling you about.

Trust us. But on the other hand, you have not only the apostolic witness, you have the prophetic word. You have the word of the prophets, which has made sure, which is confirmed, because what was spoken then, down through the centuries, has finally found fulfillment.

And therefore our faith rests on a firm foundation, the testimony of apostles who saw and heard, and the confirmed word of the prophets, which surely came to pass. And that encourages us for the future, for none of the words which God has spoken by his prophets shall fall fruitless to the ground. And we can cherish the promise of his return, just as true Israelites cherish the promise of his first coming predicted by the prophets.

And so Jesus sends his disciples on an errand and causes a prophecy to be fulfilled. The third thing that we notice in the words of our text is that Jesus receives popular acclaim. There's a great deal of enthusiasm on the part of a crowd of people.

What's kindled their enthusiasm? Two of the miracles that Jesus has performed only a few days earlier. He's seen two blind beggars by the roadside, and he has answered their prayer, doing for them exceeding abundantly above all they could ask or think, enriching them with the restoration of the gift of sight. Just a few days earlier, he had gone to a tomb where his beloved friend Lazarus was buried, and he called him forth with the voice that rouses the dead, and Lazarus came forth restored to life.

And the people begin to put the facts together. He has made the blind to see. He has caused the dead to live again.

Surely this must be the Messiah, and a boomlet begins to form, and the people begin to tout him as their candidate, and they want to make him king, and they acclaim him, and there's a superficial kind of enthusiasm that is engendered, and they have great expectations. Now will the Romans be defeated. Now will the Davidic monarchy be restored.

Now will we be again masters in our own house. And they perform symbolic actions. They cut down branches to decorate the way.

They put their cloaks on the road and on the beast of burden to add to the festive air of the occasion. That was a highly symbolic gesture. In the Old Testament, in second Kings, when Jehu was acclaimed as king of Israel, the people did precisely that.

And during the period between the Old and New Testament, when Simon Maccabeus was crowned king, the people took their cloaks and cut down branches in a very festive, celebrative mood. And so what they did was symbolic. They were hailing him as the king, but it wasn't only their symbolic gesture.

It was the significant words that they used. Drawing upon Psalm 118, they hailed Jesus as the one who comes in the name of the Lord and will save his people. He receives popular acclaim.

But the fourth thing that we notice is that he stirs the city of Jerusalem. The whole city was stirred and they asked, who is this? And the answer came from the crowd of pilgrims who were filled with enthusiasm. This is Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet from Galilee.

Well, you might say, isn't that wonderful? The crowd acclaims him as a coming king and the city of Jerusalem is deeply moved. Isn't it wonderful? When scripture tells us that the city of Jerusalem was stirred, we've got to understand that that is the very form of expression that was used earlier in the gospel of Matthew. In the second chapter of Matthew, when Herod and the power structure of Jerusalem heard that a new king had been born, they were stirred, they were moved, they were profoundly disturbed.

And the Greek term that is used there comes from the same word family that gives us seismology, that which has to do with the study of earthquakes. They were not stirred, they were not moved with a hunger and thirst for the messianic salvation that Jesus would bring. They were disturbed, they were moved, they were angry, they were indignant that this false Messiah, like so many before him, would cause a riot involving Roman reprisal and Roman repression.

And therefore we've got to maintain the status quo at all costs, get rid of this potential rabble rouser. The city was stirred, shaken, moved, but in an adverse sense disturbed by the potential troublemaker having suffered at the hands of so many false Christs before him. And so it is not strange that within a matter of days, the resistance of Jerusalem with its power structure will manipulate the crowd so that with waning enthusiasm for the king, it will then cry out, we have no king but Caesar, and as for Jesus, crucify him, give us Barabbas, but away with Jesus.

Is it any wonder that according to the story portrayed in the gospel of Luke, Jesus coming to that point in his journey toward the city, looks over Jerusalem and sheds tears. He has a heavy heart, not so much because people are rejecting him. There is no self pity in Jesus, but there is a great deal of caring and compassion for he knows that the people is sick unto death and he alone is the great physician and they

are determined to kill him.

He looks over the city, sees its hardness of heart, senses the superficiality of the acclaim of those who hail him, but are not looking for the salvation that he really came to bring. They were conceiving it and misconceiving it in political, military and economic terms, rather than realizing that he had come to save his people from their sins. What does Jesus see when he looks over our metropolitan area today? What is there that Jesus sees that moves him to tears all over again? Is it the plight of the single mother abandoned, betrayed? Is it the self-induced plight of those who do not regard the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit, but through sexual perversion or through the drug addiction that befalls them, destroy the temple of the living God? Is it the plight of the poor and the homeless in a city where things have skyrocketed so that young couples can no longer hope to have a place of their own in the ordinary course of things? Is it racism that lurks beneath the surface, only waiting for an incident to show its recrudescence? Is it a profane attitude that excludes the reality of the living God from all its human calculations? What does Jesus see in our city that would cause him to weep all over again? But if Jesus weeps over the persistence of sin in a perverse and crooked generation like ours, surely his heart is warmed and his soul rejoices and he sees of the travail of his soul and is satisfied when men and women looking upon him really acclaim him as their king, really respond to him as their redeemer, and really love him as their savior.

God granted with hearts of faith, without superficiality, without nominalism, without formalism, but from the depths of our hearts we might say, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, blessed is he who is our savior, and may the angels in highest heaven join with us in praising him. Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, you are the king of glory, the redeemer promised by the prophets in flesh and blood appearing to save us by the breaking of that body and the shedding of that blood.

Lord Jesus, come to our hearts, for we will welcome you. Amen.

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