

Hosanna! - The King Riding on a Donkey?

John 12:12-19

Palm Sunday, 2nd April 2023

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A Change of Mind

Centuries ago, most people living in Europe believed that the sun went around the earth. It made a lot of sense—every morning we observe the sun rise in the east, travel across the sky and set in the west. The sun goes round the earth!

So when people like Copernicus and Galileo taught that the earth goes round the sun, folk resisted the idea, “How can that be possible? With our own eyes we can see how the sun travels across the sky each day, and besides, if the earth *were* hurtling through space then wouldn't we feel a strong breeze all day long? And wouldn't trees and houses and people be thrown off the earth as it hurtles through space?” But as the evidence mounted, the whole world “changed it's mind.”

Something similar to that, but in the spiritual realm, is needed to become a true follower of Jesus. In the Bible it is called “repentance.” The New Testament was written in Greek and the Greek word behind the English word repentance is metanoia, meta means change and noia means mind. Metanoia, change mind. To become a true follower of Jesus requires repentance, a change of mind. From perhaps once denying that God exists to believing he does exist. From once believing that Jesus was just a good man or a good teacher, to believing that he is God's divine Son. From once thinking we were basically good people, to believing that we are all sinners who deserve the righteous judgement of God. And from, perhaps once thinking that the death of Jesus was perhaps a tragic accident, to now believing that on the cross Jesus took upon himself the punishment for our sins, so that we can be forgiven.

“You must picture me alone in my room, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the summer of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England (CS Lewis).

But how does repentance flow out of today's Palm Sunday Bible story of Jesus riding upon a donkey into Jerusalem on the Sunday before his crucifixion on Good Friday and his glorious resurrection from the dead on Easter Sunday? Well look at verse 15: *"At first the disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realise these things had been written about him..."*

The disciples - along with the crowds —hoped and thought that Jesus was riding into Jerusalem to liberate the city by force from the occupation of the Romans and to restore rule to the Jewish nation! Every Jew believed that the Messiah would chase out the Romans: "We had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel" is how two disciples explained their view in Luke 24:21.

But the disciples' thinking was completely wrong! And over the next few weeks they had to completely change their minds, they had to repent! In other words, repentance, brothers and sisters, is not just an act we do when we first begin following Jesus, at the start of our journey, changing our mind, is something we are called to do, the whole of our life. These disciples are already believers, but they still had faulty thinking which over the years had to change—and it's the same with us. So I have a question for believers who've been on the road for perhaps decades, are you and I still changing our minds? When, may I ask you, was the last time you repented, Did a U turn? You used to think THAT but now you think THIS. It could be about a person, a trial, a situation, a temptation, a doctrine, an attitude; you once believed THAT, but now you believe THIS, you've changed your mind, you've repented?

Martin Luther the great 1500s reformer, opened the Reformation in Europe with 95 ideas or "thesis." The first one read like this, *"When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."* The Christian life is like a train that runs on two parallel tracks— faith and repentance. We never get done with changing our minds of repenting, and we never get done with believing, faith.

The Story

So every time we hear or read God's word we should be humbly asking, "Lord how do you want my thinking to change in view of your Word?" (And of course how should my life change, as my thinking changes?) So that's how I would encourage us to actively, consciously think this morning, "This well known story, Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, how does the Lord want me to change as a result?"

This story is so important that it is recorded in all four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Not every event in the life of Jesus is mentioned in all four Gospels. But so important is the Triumphal Entry, which took place on the Sunday before Good Friday and Easter Sunday it is mentioned in all four Gospels.

Here's what happened. It is the start of the Passover Feast—the great annual Festival in Jerusalem when the Jews would remember how God delivered their nation from slavery in Egypt all those centuries ago. Crowds of people were pressing into Jerusalem to remember God's powerful deliverance.

The atmosphere at this feast was always tense and anti-Roman. The Romans were occupying Israel and the Jews wanted them out. Remembering how God had delivered them from Egypt heightened the hope that he would soon deliver them from their present oppressor! They read all the predictions in the Old Testament about a coming Messiah politically. The Jews were looking forward to a great Messiah-warrior who would gather a great army, defeat the Romans and liberate the nation from tyranny! And at no time during the year was this expectation higher than at Passover!

The crowd travelling to Jerusalem is made up of ordinary pilgrims who have travelled for miles, *“The next day the great crowd that had come for the feast heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem.”* Added to this great crowd were a smaller group who came from the local village of Bethany, and who had seen Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead, *“Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word.”*

This *smaller crowd* around Jesus were telling the *bigger crowd* how Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead! Turbo-charged with messianic expectation, we read,

*“They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, Hosanna!
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the King of Israel!”*

This is a very dangerous situation, but Jesus raises the temperature even higher by riding on a donkey, high up, where everyone can see him! (That's the purpose of riding a donkey, you become the focus of attention all around!) The religious leaders who were planning to kill him are infuriated, verse 19.

#1 Jesus Christ is God's promised Messiah—let's believe in him

By riding on that donkey, Jesus not only made himself the centre of attention, he was deliberately claiming to be the Old Testament Messiah, because one of the many prophecies about this coming Messiah was this: *“Do not be afraid, O daughter of Zion (that is just one of the many titles or names of Jerusalem representing the people of Israel); Do not be afraid, O daughter of Zion, see your king is coming seated on a donkey's colt.”* (Zechariah 9:9)

Right through the OT from Genesis to Malachi, God promised to send a Great Saviour, a Messiah into the world, to sort out the mess Satan and mankind had made of his world. In the very first such prophecy, recorded in Genesis 3, God said to the serpent, who was Satan, *“He will crush your (Satan's) head, and you will strike his heel”* (Genesis 3:15). The Messiah would destroy Satan (crush his head), though he would first be hurt by Satan (you will strike his heel), referring to the suffering and death of Jesus.

There are hundreds more prophecies in the OT, all predicting that, “God is going to send a Saviour, a Rescuer, a Messiah into the world.” And one of them, Zechariah 9:9, said that Messiah would ride into Jerusalem on a donkey.

So this is the first truth we learn from Palm Sunday, that Jesus was openly, publically, declaring that he was indeed the great promised Messiah! And this is most remarkable, because up until this very moment, Jesus had been very reluctant to reveal who he was! If Jesus had told people “I am the Messiah”, the Jewish leaders would have killed him—there had been many Messianic pretenders who had got the whole nation in trouble with the Romans by making that claim! So every time people thought Jesus might be the Messiah, Jesus hushed them up; on one occasion when the crowds were about to force him to be their king, he withdrew to a mountain all by himself (John 6:15)

But now, at last! Jesus is going public! “I am the Messiah, I am God's long promised Saviour.”

Who do you think Jesus is? Just a good man? Just a teacher of lofty morals “love your neighbour as yourself?” Or, today, will you “change your mind” and believe that he is God's chosen Messiah, Saviour, Deliverer? If you already believe that Jesus is the Christ (same word) thank God for the miracle he has performed in your mind, and if

you do not yet believe Jesus is messiah, change your mind today and believe.

#2 Jesus is the Sovereign King of History—let's trust in him

But there's something deeper going on here as well: Jesus is showing to the world that he is the King of History, the one who decides how history unfolds, the one who “works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.” (Ephesians 1:11) How is Jesus proving this? Well the religious leaders had decided not to kill Jesus during the Passover Feast, *“the chief priests were looking for some sly way to arrest Jesus and kill him. “But not during the feast” they said, “or the people may riot.” (Mark 14:2)*

But Jesus forced their hand and by riding into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday put them in a position where they had to change their timetable; Jesus forced them to take action much sooner than they wanted and to kill him during the feast—it was important that Jesus be killed at Passover so that his death would symbolise the Passover lamb.

The religious leaders thought they were in control of events, but by riding into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Jesus set the timetable: *“I lay down my life.. No-one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.” (John 10:17)* Jesus is the King of history! Not only of his own history but of your story and of mine, of our nation and of the world!

Does it seem to you this morning, that events around you, trials, temptations, outside circumstances, even evil powers—are dictating the course your life? Does it seem that things are “out of control”? Perhaps even spiralling out of control? Personally, nationally, globally? Palm Sunday teaches us that Jesus Christ is the Sovereign King of history! *Jesus has the “power that enables him to bring everything under his control.” (Philippians 3:15)* However dangerous and chaotic things might seem, let us learn to trust him who is in full and sovereign control of history and learn to sing,

*His good purposes will ripen fast, unfolding ev'ry hour.
The bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flow'r.
Blind unbelief is sure to err and scan God's work in vain.
God is his own interpreter, and he will make it plain.*

#3 Jesus is God's gentle King—so we need not be afraid

One final thing: Palm Sunday teaches us that Jesus is a *gentle King*, so we need not be afraid of the future. Donkeys were a symbol of gentle peace time, horses a symbol of violence and warfare. On many occasions mighty foreign rulers had ridden into Jerusalem on their imposing war steeds only to burn, to pillage and to kill! But Jesus comes to Jerusalem on a donkey to symbolise his gentleness; which is why Zechariah can say to Jerusalem, "*Do not be afraid*, O Daughter of Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt." You do not be afraid of this king!

Is there someone wanting to follow Jesus today but you are fearful of what the future will bring? Fearful of what following Jesus will involve! Or perhaps you are already a follower but God is been calling you to some new step of obedience, perhaps baptism, perhaps some new ministry, and you are fearful. You don't need to fear, for the one who calls you is gentle. He says to us all, "Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30)

Repentance

On this Palm Sunday, God calls all of us to repent, to change our minds. To those who do not yet believe that Jesus is God's Messiah, he calls you to change your mind and believe that he is God's promised Saviour. To those who think that life is out of control—to change your mind and remember that just as Jesus called the shots in the last week of his life (not his enemies), so he is in control of your life and mine, and we must trust him. And to those who fear what obedience to Christ might cost, to not be afraid, because Jesus is a Gentle Saviour.