

Mark 11.1-11 | Sermon for Palm Sunday 'Blessed is He Who Comes in the Name of the Lord'

Isaiah 50:4-9a / Psalm 31:9-16 / Philippians 2:5-11 / Mark 11.1-11

Proclaimed on Palm Sunday, 24 March 2024 at Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Adelaide by Pastor Tom Pietsch.

Heavenly Father, as your Son Jesus Christ was welcomed by the crowds, give us your Holy Spirit that we too may welcome He who comes in the name of the Lord. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Jesus' humble journey

Today is a day for rejoicing. Our King has come. For much of his public ministry, Jesus has taken a somewhat hidden and secretive approach to his status as King and Lord.

But today it's a different story. The joyous acclamation spread throughout Jerusalem and Jesus let it come to him. We heard in verse 9 that there were people in front of him and behind him all singing his praises. And Jesus even encourages it. Contributes to it. A good portion of our Gospel reading concerns Jesus making preparations for his triumphant entry into Jerusalem. Many times Jesus would have walked into Jerusalem, presumably blending in with the crowds. But now he arranges to ride in, and so legitimises the heroic welcome, just as he seeks and legitimises our praises too.

There are a number of details we can draw out that build the sense of Jesus being a royal, holy king. For instance, we hear Jesus specifying that the donkey colt the disciples will find will be one that "has never been ridden" (11:3), recalling the Old Testament stipulations that an animal devoted to a holy purpose must be one that has not been put to any ordinary use (Numbers 19:2; Deuteronomy 21:3; 1 Samuel 6:7). We can also observe Jesus exercising a kingly prerogative, a royal right, to requisition any animal for his service. If anyone asks the disciples why they are doing this, Jesus instructs them to say that the 'Lord' needs it. This is the only time in Mark's Gospel that Jesus explicitly refers to himself as the Lord, ὁ κύριος, the term in Greek for the sacred name of God (11:4). This is going to be a time of rejoicing and acclamation.

But in the middle of praise, Jesus' journey still remains humble. His choice of animal is low to the ground. A donkey. Jesus thus fulfills the old prophecy of Zechariah 9:9: *'Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey'*. The prophecy gives the right note, an entrance that is both triumphant and humble. More on that in a moment. We also hear nothing about Jesus addressing the crowd. He receives their praises, but he doesn't bask in the glory, he's not distracted from his mission. As we heard of Christ in Isaiah, *"I have set my face like flint"* (50:7)

Instead of speaking to the praising masses, he instead goes on the Temple. Like an AFL Grand Final player visiting the MCG the night before the Grand Final, Jesus goes to the Temple in the evening and just has a look around. As if preparing himself for the place of contest. Soaking it in. And then, he doesn't even stay in the city. He could have been hosted by anyone that night, but he rather leaves for the satellite town of Bethany. A small place. A humble place.

Our humble journey

In going through Jesus' entry, I have drawn out Jesus' mixture of humility and triumph. And I have done this in part because our reading from Philippians encourages to use Jesus' character as a model for our own lives. In that reading St Paul says, "*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus*" who did not grasp at his high status as one equal with God, but rather humbled himself all the way to the cross. And because of this, St Paul adds, God has also highly exalted Christ above everyone, so that all beings under the earth, on earth and in heaven will bend their knee to him and confess Him as Lord (Philippians 2:5ff).

That is the kind of mind God is giving you, with Jesus as your model. Humility amid great triumph. Great joy and praise, but with a lowly nature. Not avoiding the call to rejoice always, but nor shirking the humility. "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you" (James 4:10). Notice that in Philippians Jesus is the one humbling himself, but then God is the one exalting him. So too that's how God speaks to us in James. That we can humble ourselves, confident that God will exalt us. For really, the two go together.

Jesus shows us that, as Christians, joyful confidence and humility need each other. We are not told to tone down the joy a bit, tone down the humility a bit, and then you can find the perfect balance. Instead Christ shows us that full joy needs full humility lest it turn into pride. And that full humility needs fully confidence in Christ's victory lest it turn into despair. *Blessed are the poor in spirit*, our Lord declares. Joyous are the humble. And humble are the joyous.

The English writer GK Chesterton loved this seeming paradox of the Christian life. He expressed it once by saying, 'One can hardly think too little of one's self. One can hardly think too much of one's soul.' Or, once, in a more imaginative way, he put it this way: 'the angels can fly because they take themselves lightly.'

Two weeks ago I went to a concert in which a visiting Icelandic pianist played some of Johann Sebastian Bach's music, the Goldberg Variations. Some from this parish were there too. As I listened to the sublime music, it was impressed upon me how Bach's music incorporates both a lowliness, and attention to the sufferings and yearnings we all face, combined with a kind of elevation of the human spirit – that we have been

created by God, and bought with a great price, and in Christ, even now exalted and sitting at the heavenly places. Now Bach may not be your thing. He may not help you cultivate the same mind that was in Christ Jesus. But just a few chapters on in Philippians, St Paul says: “whatever [it is that] is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Philippians 4:8). God encourages us to seek out things that help us cultivate the mind of Christ.

And God doesn't just leave you alone to do this. For Sunday by Sunday, as you attend the divine service, God is at work in you, renewing you in the mind of Christ, cultivating both humility and joy within you. You draw near to God in repentance of your sins, but also in great joy as Christ takes away your sins by His blood and His gracious Word. You bow your heads and plead for mercy. And then you lift up your heads and glorify God in the highest. In hearing God's Word you come to know in humility and humiliation that you are chief of sinners, and yet you also are being led by God to rejoice with heavenly praise, that in Christ you are nothing less than temple of the Holy Spirit, holy people where God dwells with his power and grace. This week you will be drawn into anguish at the suffering Christ takes for us, and yet we call this Friday Good and sing joyfully at the miracle of miracles he won that day.

We stand today on the cusp of Holy Week, full of both joy and humility, led by our joyous king who is humble and rides on a donkey.

Blessed is He Who Comes in the Name of the Lord

And so, of course, Jesus is more than just an example or model for us to follow. He is our King, and he has come into the world, and come into our lives. This feature is brought home especially to us in the acclamation with which we hear the crowd praise Jesus. *'Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!'* (Mark 11:9-10).

This cry from the crowd had overtones of a military victory. The words 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord' come from Psalm 118 (verse 26), which was a royal song of thanksgiving for a military victory. The cry of *Hosanna!* was also an acclamation that originally was a cry for deliverance, or a cry of victory. The crowd are welcoming a triumphant king, and Jesus, despite knowing their fickleness and what was to come, graciously accepts their praises, as he does ours.

But I want to close by drawing out one important feature of our liturgy today. For every time we celebrate Holy Communion, we repeat the words of the crowd. The Holy, Holy, Holy which we sing comes from two sources in the Bible. The words Holy, Holy, Holy is the song of the angels, found in both Isaiah (6:3) and Revelation (4:8). But then our

song continues with the words of the crowd on Palm Sunday: *“Hosanna in the Highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the Highest.”* From the very earliest times, the church has made the crowd’s acclamation our own. It’s Palm Sunday every Sunday.

For in Holy Communion, we welcome the coming of Jesus Christ as our victorious Messiah. We sing aloud to him as the one who comes in the power of God’s name, and as the victor over all evil powers in the cosmos. Hosanna in the highest means our praises join with the highest heaven, but also that Christ’s victory extends to every part of the cosmos. And by doing this in the Holy Communion liturgy, we are singing that his very body and blood of Christ are the spoils of his victory. The fruits of his triumph. That Christ is truly present on the altar, and with power to save.

So as we enter Holy Week may we be full of humility, for we are in desperate need of saving. But may we also be full of joy. For our King has come, with the spoils of his victory, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins, bringing with him the eternal heavenly feast. Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! In Jesus’ name. Amen.

And may the peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.