



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

Lent 6: The one who faced the music

By Rev Dr Keith Garner

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John 12:12-19

12 The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. **13** 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!" **14** Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, as it is written: **15** "Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt." **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 that these things had been done to him. **17** 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. **18** Many people, because they had heard that he had performed this sign, went out to meet him. **19** So the Pharisees said to one another, "See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!"

Have you had the experience of having someone share some confidential information and being told you must keep it that way? Then you go somewhere, meet a group of people and realise that someone has 'let the cat out of the bag'. The secret you were told has now become public! Hold that thought for a moment ...

We have travelled with Jesus and his disciples in the remarkable encounters with Nicodemus, a Samaritan woman, a man born blind and Lazarus. Two things appear to inform us when I turn to John 12:

- The close proximity to and significant of the Passover
- The news that Lazarus has been raised is now out!

The fact that Lazarus has been raised from the dead is now causing a stir amongst the people. How could such news not excite a response when heard by others? Now the One who raised him is on the way to Jerusalem to 'face the music' and whatever that might involve.

Very often as we sit on the edge of Holy Week, we look at the entry into the city of Jerusalem through the account in one of the Synoptic gospels... but I want to look at it from John's perspective, keeping in mind what we have discovered in recent weeks.

Two biblical points are worth emphasising, before we move more directly to the passage itself—and both of these introduce the account:

- Jesus is anointed by Mary at Bethany, as Martha serves at table (12:1-8)
- There is growing tension and a plot to kill Jesus (11:45-47 and 12:9-11)

It is very important to recognise the growing tension in John's account for it explains why emotions would be running high as Jesus entered the city. John appears to frame the whole

episode in the continuing story of Lazarus. He is met by crowds in exuberant celebration ... because of the sign (v.18). A theme which persists throughout Mark's Gospel is 'the Messianic Secret'. By the time we reach the final week in the ministry of Jesus, that secret (similar to the one I referred to a few moments ago) is well and truly out, even if not fully understood by the disciples, let alone the crowds.

If Jesus Christ can raise a man from death, then surely he can set a captive people free from the bonds of Roman oppression. Jesus is walking into a storm and this is a far cry from the pleasant palm waving we often associate with this day. Jesus Christ does not seek to avoid the challenge and he will certainly face the music! How many of us would have chosen a different way?

The reaction of the Pharisees is one of frustration, which will in turn lead to impatience and thicken the plot to get rid of him. Strong words follow his entry into the city and his reception by the crowds.

Text: John 12:19

"So the Pharisees said to one another, 'See this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him.'"

The Pharisees are now on the defensive and, as one writer put it, "But in their angry discussion they unknowingly reveal how universal the mission of Jesus had really become."

Edward Hughes Pruden once told of a picture that hung in his study. It was Heinrich Hofman's painting of the boy Jesus at the age of twelve in the temple at Jerusalem, talking to the doctors of the law, answering and asking questions.

Pruden said he was intrigued by the picture because it spoke not only of Christ, but also of those elderly authorities of the temple, wondering what this young man might one day become.

They could never have imagined that Jesus would refuse to be lured by success. In the Person of Jesus we meet raw courage in all its fullness and nowhere is this more clearly observed than in his final week of ministry.

At the outset of this short series, we talked about the love which Jesus Christ offers to the whole world and, in a way that is consistent in John, we now see how that love is making its wider impact.

It opens up a number of thoughts about what might be our own response to challenge, especially when it is costly:

We can avoid the music

Jesus has spoken to his disciples about the truth that he is going to have to suffer and die. The disciples respond in different ways, for example:

- Peter took him to one side and rebuked him for sharing this news (Matthew 16:22)
- Thomas wanted to make it a point of physical conflict and he was prepared to lead the fight (John 11:16)

These two very different responses from trusted disciples, who would later become leaders in the earliest churches, demonstrate how people want to avoid the challenge and choose another way.

Both Peter and Thomas will have further issues to deal with: they will need to deal with denial and doubt respectively. Each in his own way could be said to have wanted to avoid the music. It will be a matter of great challenge for both of them, but they come through and eventually face the music in their own lives.

As we arrive at Palm Sunday, we see the twin themes of praise and passion unite, but we cannot choose one and avoid the other.

The very theme ‘Triumphal Entry’ troubles me somewhat—and even more so in the light of Michael Green’s sub-title “The King comes in judgement to his capital”.

Jesus comes in a most unexpected way, acting out a principle of humble service, which we will see very clearly enunciated in the next chapter of John.

As we examine the different accounts of the first Palm Sunday, we cannot avoid recognising that the crowds reacted with enthusiasm as Jesus entered the city.

In Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice’s rock musical Jesus Christ Superstar, there are many aspects which, not unlike Russell Crowe’s Noah, are helpful but require further biblical scrutiny. However, there are some very reflective words placed upon the lips of the disciples in Superstar: “You’ve even gone a bit too far to get the message home, before it gets too late ...” These words come from a song entitled “Can we start again, Lord?” The point was and is that they can’t!—because the journey is moving inexorably in one direction toward the cross.

We can avoid the music by seeking to divert attention away from the reality of what has to be faced. However, the pursuit of truth lies central to Jesus’ journey to the cross and that cannot be avoided.

The painful reality of Palm Sunday is that it is the way of the cross. Today is not a time for merely celebrating donkeys, grasping palms, or even celebratory music; it is a day to recognise that what lies ahead is for the salvation of the world! This is certainly the Sunday of the Passion.

We can face the music and blame others

When life’s challenges come our way, it is possible to seek to avoid the challenge by diluting its message, thereby lessening its impact, and subtly blaming others for what has happened.

Jesus deliberately fulfilled the Messianic prophecies and, as the crowds threw garments onto his pathway, their jubilation was unrestrained. It is interesting that Jesus did not seek in any way to quieten them. This has to be examined in the light of the fact that in Luke’s gospel we are told the Pharisees wanted Jesus to calm the crowds down:

“Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, ‘Teacher, rebuke your disciples!’
‘I tell you,’ he replied, ‘if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.’” (Luke 19:39-40)

As Jesus entered the city, one could imagine traders and citizens alike stopping to watch this exuberant procession as it moved along. An enthusiasm for Christ will always arouse a slumbering world.

In the coming week, we shall draw people’s attention to the Person of Jesus Christ—and some of the options as to who he is will inevitably arise. Mere external excitement cannot produce dedication; simply identifying who he is needs to be attended by something more, for example:

- Praises without voicing demands to be met—are empty
- Recognition of his person without responsibility for his work—is shallow
- Noisy crowds can be followed by guilty complacency
- Massive open popularity does not seal commitment

We are brought face-to-face with challenges which must be addressed—and we cannot blame others and take no responsibility ourselves.

I noted the words of Doug Larson, who wrote, “The reason people blame things on others is there is only one other choice.”

All blame has about it the ‘waste of time’ tag. No matter how much fault you can find in another, and regardless of the blame you can attach to someone else, it will not change you. What it does:

- It keeps the focus away from ourselves, when living in circumstances that lack peace
- It may help you to make another unhappy.

But it will never solve the situation. In our increasingly litigious society, I despair at the growing numbers of people who want to bring others down and will not talk things through. I have seen this time and time again in families and when friends are in a situation of conflict.

In my final year of school, before embarking on further education, I had a year when I could choose a subject that was totally outside my academic pursuits. I selected drama and I suppose that year of attending all kinds of theatre gave me a love of drama and cinema that I still retain.

I continue to be captivated by Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot. On the lips of Vladimir, one of those ‘men of the road’, are the words, “There’s a man all over you, blaming his boots for the faults of his feet.”

As Jesus neared the conclusion of his journey and entered the city, whatever the choices might have been for him, he will not turn the attention on others.

We can choose to face the music

On this Sunday, there is an increasing emphasis upon the Passion of our Lord, rather than just his entry into the city. There are two positive reasons why this is helpful:

- Many Christians today avoid a meaningful celebration of Holy Week
- The entry into the city only makes sense when we connect it directly with the events that will soon follow

It was compulsory for Jews to attend the Passover and all Jewish men who lived anywhere close to Israel/Palestine would try to be at the feast, often with their families, at least once in their lifetime.

This helps to paint a picture of the setting of the words, “The next day the great crowd that had come for the Feast heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem.” (v.12)

The different reactions are worth consideration:

- Some would merely be sightseers—and the news that Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead would certainly stir attention (v.18)

- Perhaps those who had been at Bethany were leading the palm-scattering and shouting ‘Hosanna’ (v.13)
- What was going on in the minds of the disciples? It would only be with hindsight that they would understand the details of the events (v.16)

The cry of the people was ‘Hosanna’ (v.13). This is a word that has entered our language, chiefly because of this event. It does, of course, have its roots in the Old Testament and the Psalms (Psalm 118:25) and is normally rendered, “O Lord, save us ...”

When I first read an account of the entry of Jesus into the city, I asked myself what was the relationship between asking God to save us and to be cheering at the same time.

Augustine suggested that it was “a state of mind, rather than having any positive significance”. In other words, it might be, as Ian Barclay suggested, not unlike the English ‘Hurray’ which one dictionary mysteriously defined as a ‘later substitute for ‘Huzza’ without going as far as to say what the earlier word meant.

Palm Sunday has about it the open declaration of who Jesus is. Religious leaders observe what is happening but fail to really see just who he is.

Myopia is a condition commonly called short sightedness and eye specialists tell us that it is not helped by constantly looking at things close on. It is important to look at things from a distance. We find difficult to see beyond our own emotions and personal perspective.

As we examine this entry into the city, we recognise that there was an enormous amount of short sightedness:

- There were Romans exerting their power
- There were crowds involved in adulation
- There were disciples who were turned in on themselves.

However, long-supressed emotions are breaking out in unrestrained praise. In actions, we see cloaks and branches strewn on the ground and the well-known messianic psalms are sung by those observing the scene. We are invited to lift our eyes and see just what is happening beyond our immediate horizon.

When Jesus enters the city, we are encouraged to consider what it might mean to invite him to be part of our lives.

If Jesus Christ were to become part of our lives, then surely some of the things that might change could be:

- Petty insularity—to a wider concern for others
- Impatience—giving way to loving kindness
- Fear—making way for generosity

However, the choice is also ours about whether we will face the music, for to invite Christ to be part of our lives will mean that what lies ahead in the cross is also what it means to follow him.

We must guard against being too critical about Jerusalem and we must ask ourselves a question: What would be the reaction if Jesus entered Sydney, Brisbane or Melbourne? Many of us might line the streets as if we were welcoming back our team, following the

Grand Final; and some of us would choose to stand behind others to ensure we didn't get too involved!

But just as surely as it was at the first Easter, we too are complicit in the journey that will end in a cross.

It is impossible to remain neutral about Jesus Christ. We may not sit on the fence:

- Nicodemus had to make his choice
- Those who observed Jesus with the woman at the well had to make their choice
- The religious experts struggled with their choice when they saw him heal a man born blind
- Nowhere are there more people having to make a choice than in the raising of Lazarus

As Jesus entered the city, people were beginning to make their choices ... openly or in the hidden parts of their lives. The question is 'Who is this man?' As you decide, so you are drawn closer into grasping who he is—and what he can do with your life.