

Palm Sunday

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John 12¹²⁻¹⁹, Psalm 93

Can you remember a time in your life when you really felt welcome? When you knew beyond doubt that your coming, your arrival had been not only desired but anticipated. That someone was glad you'd come. That someone was really pleased you were here? I can. It happened every year up till about my 13th year, just after Christmas usually. [Story of arriving at this small orchard just outside of Hastings where my father had grown up/ mission to get there/ arrival usually late at night/ 3 people greeted us/ my grandmother seemed especially pleased and would always give us a big hug and a kiss.]

I so looked forward to that welcome and to the holiday that would follow. It was, without a doubt, the highlight of my year. I look forward to it because I felt secure there, because I really knew I was accepted there and because, I think, it was a place where I was special, where I was given a little room to be me.

And the interesting thing is, on this day, Palm Sunday, we discover that God also longs for a welcome. He longs to belong to our families, to our communities, to our circle of friends. He longs to have a place in our hearts and He looks for that same sort of welcome from us...

On this one day of the year we celebrate with Jesus perhaps the height of His public ministry. We celebrate the day when His own people finally **welcomed** Him into their greatest city and paid Him something, at least, of the homage He was due.

Welcome Jesus! They shout as they wave their palm braches before Him – reminiscent of the Feast of Dedication of a new King.

Welcome Jesus! They shout as they lay their palm branches before Him – a classic sign of welcome to a conquering army.

Welcome Jesus! They shout as they lay before Him their cloaks, a sign of homage to a King.

Welcome Jesus! They shout as they greet Him with a quote from Isaiah and Zechariah which directly links Jesus to the Messianic prophecies of the OT. This is the One they spoke of – the One who would bring redemption and freedom to Israel.

Welcome Jesus! They shout as they greet Him on a young donkey – a sign not of a violence or force but of humility and grace. This King is One they don't have to be afraid of. One who will show them kindness and grace if only they would recognise Him, give Him a place, give Him His place... and, for a moment, for this brief moment, it looks as if they will.

It looks as if finally Jesus' own people will recognise Him for Who He is. Jesus, God's Son, the Messiah. Yes! There are doubts, there are concerns, there are whispers in the crowd. Is He? Can He be? It is true? But in this tide of joy and hope most are carried along, hoping against hope that He will bring the

promised freedom from all the things which enslave them. Hunger, disease, poverty, political slavery, religious confusion. Perhaps He can. Perhaps He is...

And notice please, that Jesus does not reject their worship of Him. He does not reject the titles given to Him. Rather He accepts the welcome; He accepts the praise; He accepts the adoration. Clearly He is the King, the Redeemer, the Messiah and He accepts their welcome of Him graciously and humbly.

Put yourself in the place of the crowd welcoming Him. What might have been your motive for be excited about this Jesus coming into Jerusalem. What might you have been hoping for? What might have you been worried about? What doubts might you have had?

Hopes	Concerns
Prosperity	Being duped by a fraudster
Healing	Not receiving anything material out of this
Peace	Not conquering the Romans – no political freedom
Freedom from oppression	Wrong theology
Political independence	A loss of face before the Romans
Salvation	A loss of political position and power
A return to racial glory and pride	No chance of revenge
Vindication against the Romans	No change in social status
Revenge	Offending God

It's clear, isn't it, that there were a huge number of mixed motives in this welcome of Jesus. It's hard to say how much real support Jesus had although the fickleness of that support is, as we all know, about to be revealed. One thing is clear however, and this is that Jesus didn't care at this point. He was more concerned to accept the welcome at face value and walk, as it were, into whatever awaited Him. He receives the genuine with the disingenuous; the self serving with the self-giving, the compassionate with the calculating, the naive with the political schemer. **Whoever will welcome Him in, He receives. What matters is that He is welcomed.**

What matters in our life is that He is welcomed, day in and day out – into the vagaries and inconsistencies of our life; into the self-serving aspects along with the self-giving aspects; into the holy along with the unholy parts of our life; into the understanding along with the confused aspects of who we are. **Somehow**, Jesus can take all of this **unto Himself** to restore and revive it. You see there is no real knowing whether our strength or our weakness is of any use to God. Sometime what we see as a weakness is really our strength when it is given over to God and sometime what we see as a strength becomes something of a weakness when we walk with God.

Peter the disciple was absolutely committed to Jesus and pledged his life to protect Him and yet this passion became for him his greatest weakness. Because of it he could not see the road God had planned for His own Son; he could not see what God's will was and pledged himself to prevent it. You see at this stage He had not truly welcomed the obedient Christ into this part of his life. It was unchanged, unregenerate passion which Peter thought would serve God when all Jesus needed was for Peter to welcome the Holy Spirit in.

And yet take John Mark, perhaps the first to truly desert Jesus and also the one who became so scared when travelling with Paul and Apollos that he went home, he turned back. What weakness, what a lack of commitment. Yet it is through his hand that we have most of the Gospel story in clear, simple style. An account which has become the basis for both Matthew and Luke and which is also reflected in John. God accepted His welcome and made something wonderful out of his weakness. **God lives for our welcome friends. He does not judge it or spurn its incompleteness or its lesser motives. All he wants is our welcome. Lord! Come into my life today! You Are Welcome!**

So God delights in the bringing of our weaknesses to Him. He is not turned off by these. He is not offended by our doubts or our objections. The truth is that no one ever fully understands God and so there will always be some confusion, some doubt hanging around even those whom we might consider Giants in the faith. What they know so well and what we have to learn is that the right place for these objections and these doubts is **with God, to God, before God**. They voice these things. They bring them to God. They allow His welcome to embrace these as well!

So if you are offended by the humility of Jesus as some were then, bring it to Him. If you are offended by His apparent inaction in some matter which had become vital to you, bring it to Him. If you are disappointed with Him as many were in Jerusalem only a matter of hours after this wonderful welcome – bring it to Him. And if you are confused and feel you do not understand Him again, bring it to Him. **He is as interested in your doubts as He is in your understanding**. God longs for our welcome. He gave Himself on a Cross so that we might be able to welcome Him in. SO let me ask you today...

Have you welcomed Jesus into your life? This is the question of this day, Palm Sunday. Christ longs for your welcome; He is just waiting for you to open the door to His love and grace, to His strength and His gentle touch. If you've never said to Jesus 'You are welcome in my life, in my heart,' I'm going to lead you shortly in a prayer of welcome which you can repeat after me and then I'd love for you to tell someone that you trust that you've done this. You can even email us at the office so that we can give you some things to help you know what this means for you and what to do next.

And for those of us who have welcomed Jesus into our lives before, we too need to ask ourselves, just how welcome Jesus really is. Is there, in fact, some place in our life where Jesus isn't welcome? Some knot of unforgiveness, some treasured bad habit, some guilty pleasure? Is there some place in our life where Jesus is not welcome? God desires that we might welcome Him into every aspect of our life so that He can redeem it for good.

So if you are willing to welcome this gentle King into your life, if you know He hasn't been welcome or if you know there is a place in your life where He hasn't been welcome please pray with me and then, for those of you who are doing this for the first time, after the service please let someone know that you've done this because we'd like to walk with you and help you grow as a welcomer of God.