

Pastor Joe Polzin  
John 12:12-43; Philippians 2:5-11  
“Our Humble King”  
Year A – Palm Sunday  
April 5, 2020

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

Take a moment to think about humility. Generally speaking, we like humble people. Humility is considered a good thing when we see it in others. We don't like prideful and brash people—it rubs us the wrong way. And this is as true for a normal person as it is for someone who is in a position of leadership.

I recently read an article about the Prime Minister of The Netherlands, for instance, a man named Mark Rutte. He has been Prime Minister for about a decade, and yet he's known as one of the most disarming, gentle, and humble people you'll ever know. He's famous for riding his bike to work just about every day, and he still teaches a Dutch and Civics class at a local secondary school. I don't know much about his politics, but you have to admit, there's something appealing about a person who had so much power for so long, and yet, at least seemingly, none of it has gone to his head.

But this isn't common, is it? It's not how the world usually works. For the people we know who are at the top of the food chain, political leaders and CEOs and celebrities, people who have a tremendous amount of influence and power, we don't necessarily expect them to be humble, do we? In fact, if you think about it, at those top positions of government or business or culture, humility might even be seen as a weakness. Like they're just asking to be overpowered. Much better to be strong, the world says, and maybe even a little arrogant, because at least we know, at the end of the day, they'll get the job done. Plus, we view a little pride as kind of charming in some ways, as it makes for a more entertaining personality.

As we think about all that, on this Palm Sunday, I wonder how the triumphal entry of Jesus was viewed in his day. After all, when it comes to Jesus' humble life and ministry, this is the most celebration from a worldly sense he ever receives. Palm branches waving, a giant crowd made even larger because of all the Passover pilgrims in Jerusalem, and cries of “Hosanna!” which means, “Save us now!” “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!” (John 12:13) I think the people, who had heard about Jesus' miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead just a few days before, were now imagining how life was going to change with this powerful man named Jesus, and what it would look like when he would take his throne as King.

But for all the power and influence Jesus had, and all the acclaim he was now receiving, he likely surprised people with how humble he was. He may not have ridden a bicycle into Jerusalem, but it was the ancient-equivalent: the colt of a donkey. That's not exactly the image of a powerful leader, is it? But it was the sign of the humble King of Israel, the promised Messiah, as was written in the Old Testament. And the second half of our Gospel Reading shows us that, whatever expectations people had as they were welcoming Jesus into Jerusalem, none of them went to his head. None of them distracted Jesus from the purpose that he knew was his.

When some Greeks asked to see Jesus immediately after he arrives in the city, Jesus responds, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified” (John 12:23). But to reveal what kind of glory he was talking about, Jesus goes on, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain

of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (12:24). Jesus is the grain of wheat. And he knew that he had come to die, and to die alone. But that by his death, he would bear much fruit for the benefit of the whole world. He goes on to say that this is his purpose, this is why he has come (12:27), and that when he is lifted up from the earth on the cross, in the moment of his death, that is when he will draw all people to himself (12:32).

Now, is this what people were expecting from Jesus? This kind of humility? Did they even understand what he was telling them? John tells us that those around him didn’t believe in him (12:37), and we certainly know that, in the end, the disciples didn’t comprehend what he was doing, either. Not yet, anyway. And the disconnect is his humility. Here was Jesus, at the height, supposedly, of his power and fame. He had just raised a guy from the dead. People were thinking about all he could do to the corrupt Sadducees, or the oppressive Romans! But instead, he rides a donkey, and talks about dying. Generally speaking, we like humility, but not when it looks like weakness. And to many, Jesus looked weak.

Our Epistle Reading today tells this story of Jesus, but from a different perspective, from a heavenly perspective. Philippians chapter 2 says, “Though [Christ Jesus] was in the form of God, [he] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (2:6-8).

This is talking about what Christ chose to do when he became a human, it’s talking about his incarnation. So often, I think we skip over the incarnation, not stopping to realize how astounding and surprising that really is. That the eternal, Creator God, the one whom no one else is like because everything else is his creation and he is the Maker, the one who has all power and wisdom and might, the one who made us human beings in the beginning, he chose to lay all that aside, and become one of us. And why did he do this? Because we needed him to. We were dying in our sin. We were separated from him in our guilt. And so he came after us. And to do that, the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son, chose not to forever grasp on to his form of God, but instead humbled himself to become part of his creation. To become a human being.

But that’s not all. You see, even becoming a human, as astounding and surprising as that is, one might assume that, as a human, he would choose to become the most powerful human. That he would come to whip us lowly, sinful humans into shape. That he would set himself up as a king on earth, and lord his power as the Creator God over all his creation. And no one would have blamed him, because he’s God! And he deserves to do that.

But that’s not what he chose to do. Jesus truly did demonstrate his Godly power in all his teaching and miracles, his great compassion and mercy he had on people to save and to heal them. And then the ultimate demonstration of his power was when he chose to humble himself, and go to the cross, and die. The world consistently thinks about glory, power, and strength in earthly terms, while Jesus uses his glory, power, and strength to do the most humble thing possible.

That’s what Palm Sunday is all about. It’s about the King, the true King of all, willing to be the servant of all. He was willing to die on a cross, sacrificing himself for us, the ones who least deserve it, but whom he loves the most. Every year, I’m always struck by the final stanza in the Palm Sunday hymn, “Ride On, Ride On in Majesty,” which says, “Ride on, ride on in majesty! In lowly pomp ride on to die. Bow Thy meek head to mortal pain, then take, O God, Thy pow’r and reign.”

Jesus didn’t ride into Jerusalem to take his power and reign by starting a revolution or a reformation. Jesus rode into Jerusalem to take his power and reign by dying, because he knew

that by his death, he would accomplish something truly powerful. He knew the thing that had power over his people wasn't a government or a religious system, it was much more dangerous than that. We were enslaved by sin and death. And by his death, he released us from our sins, as the perfect sacrifice. And by his resurrection he released us from death itself.

And when we, as Christians, realize that we have been set free from our servitude to sin and death by the one who became a servant for us, that we have been drawn to our crucified Lord at the cross, and drawn to him at his empty grave, we are glad to follow in his footsteps. That's what the Apostle Paul is talking about in Philippians 2 in the first place.

He says, "Have this mind among yourselves" (2:5), talking about the same mind that Christ Jesus had when he did everything he did in humility. Two verses before this, Paul writes, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also the interests of others" (2:3-4). Why do you do that? Because that's what Jesus did for you, and he now enables you to treat others in the same way.

This time of social distancing challenges us as Christians, because all the ways we normally would think of serving someone else have gone out the window. And yet, this time also presents new opportunities for you to count someone else more significant than yourself. Don't be tempted to put yourself first. That's what the world is doing, hoarding, and putting our own needs before anyone else. Yes, you should keep yourself healthy and safe, as we all are doing now. But then use your health that God gives you to serve those whom God has put around you: your family, your neighbors, even your enemies. Put their needs ahead of your own.

What does this look like? Well, it looks like going out of your way to keep others healthy, because they may be more at risk than you. Or putting off catching up on all your entire Netflix watch list, and using some of this time to call someone else, or write to them, and show concern for how they're doing. Or many people will need this upcoming, stimulus money to make ends meet, but for those who aren't as concerned financially, perhaps it looks like using a portion of that to help someone else who's in need. Or I heard about someone who picks up the meals that the schools are offering, but because his family has enough food, he looks for ways to share it with those who can't get to the store right now.

These are ways that, as Christians, we can have the mind of Christ, who showed us what it means to not consider the things that are ours as a privilege we deserve, but rather as an opportunity to serve someone else. If Jesus, who is God, chose to die for me, then what excuse do I have not to serve others in the same way? And this is what Christians have been known for throughout history, that when things get really bad in society, whether it's war, or natural disaster, or a pestilence, that they are the ones who stick it out and are showing the love of Christ through it all.

Now, of course, we often fail at having this mind of Christ, and doing what we should. And we need forgiveness for that, and God's help to do better. But that's also why Jesus rode into Jerusalem in the first place, to go to the cross, to forgive our selfish and petty sins, and lead us to live lives under the shadow of the cross, a life full of forgiveness, and love, and service.

And here's another warning. The world will not encourage you to act like this. Your sinful nature will rebel against you doing this. Many will look at you and assume you're weak because of it. And what does the world do with those who look weak? Well, they do what they did with Jesus. Not only will their misunderstand you, they may accuse you of ulterior motives. They may harass and put you down. They may even try to stop you, hurt you, or in the extreme, kill you.

But that won't stop you, because it didn't stop Jesus. Knowing all that Jesus has done for you, knowing that your Lord and King journeyed to the cross, and then journeyed through death and the grave to resurrected life on Easter morning, knowing that you too will share in this resurrected life in the day when he returns again, it enables you to live in such a way like Philippians 2 describes. In humility. True humility.

The day is coming when Jesus will return again. The day when the Humble King will return in a full display of power and glory. Paul says, "Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (2:9-11).

We follow the our Humble King who was willing to be humbled in death, but then who was glorified in new life on Easter morning, and the God who, when he comes again, will be glorified forever and ever. Palm Sunday reminds us that we, too, will welcome our King on the day that is drawing ever closer, the day when we will no longer shout, "Hosanna! Save us now!" but, "Alleluia! You have saved us for all eternity!" In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. **Amen.**