

Here Comes The Conquering King

John 12:12-36

Pomp and ceremony

The world is getting ready for another great royal procession - in just under a month Harry and Meghan will be married and their first trip will be a tour of Windsor to greet the crowds of adoring fans. People have always been drawn to royalty, to get a glimpse of these important people. They're always a show of great power and wealth and pomp and ceremony.

But it's not always as peaceful as wedding processions. In ancient times these royal processions would often be celebrations of great military victories. Kind of like a victory parade we put on when a sport team wins the premiership, or our country's athletes return victorious from the games. Everyone celebrating the great victory, the triumph over enemies, with the spoils of war on show - the gold medals or premiership cup.

One of the most famous ones in Jesus' day was the story of a great victory, about 170 years earlier.

A Jewish leader named Judah Maccabaeus lead an uprising against the Greek empire that had invaded Jerusalem. They had defiled Temple and Judah along with his brothers galvanised the resistance and drove them out. It was a stunning and unexpected victory.

And the Maccabees became national heroes. The victory was celebrated as the brothers processed Jerusalem with music and palm branches. They even sung Psalm 118 - a psalm that paints a picture of God's coming king who would deliver his people.

- 23 the LORD has done this,
and it is marvellous in our eyes.
- 24 The LORD has done it this very day;
let us rejoice today and be glad.
- 25 LORD, save us!
LORD, grant us success!
- 26 Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD.
From the house of the LORD we bless you.
- 27 The LORD is God,
and he has made his light shine on us.
With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession
up to the horns of the altar.
- 28 You are my God, and I will praise you;
you are my God, and I will exalt you.
- 29 Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his love endures forever.

Fresh in their national history was this great procession, this great celebration of victory over their enemies. And afterwards, the palm branch became a symbol of military triumph.

In the 60s AD - not long after these events in John's gospel - a Jewish group called the Zealots rebelled again against their overlords - this time the Romans not the Greeks. But they were suppressed and it led to the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. But this revolutionary movement minted its own coin - and on it was the symbol of a palm branch!

So when this crowd gathers around Jesus as he enters the capital city, waving palm branches and shouting out Psalm 118; we're meant to feel this real charge in the air. It's full of tension.

There were probably about 2 million people packed into Jerusalem for this feast - the greatest festival of the year, the Passover, when the people remembered God's greatest act of deliverance, saving his people from slavery in Egypt in the Exodus. And when word gets around that Jesus was coming in to the city they all head out to line the streets.

You can imagine the conversation. Daniel from Galilee is talking to his friend Esther. 'I was there over by the Lake back home when Jesus came - there must've been at least 15 thousand of us there. And he just turned a few loaves and fish into enough food for us all! I heard he walked over the water afterwards... But I've been hearing other stories too - lame beggars being healed; I even saw Lazarus the other day who swears he had died and Jesus brought him back to life! If anyone can lead us again to victory it's this guy!! The moment he calls for people to rise up against Rome I'm there!'

But then Jesus does something unexpected.

The Conquering King: who triumphs on a donkey (12-19)

In v 14 he finds a young donkey. It would have raised some eyebrows; especially for those who were expecting this to be Jesus' leading a military revolution. Surely Jesus would come in armour sitting high on a war horse, ready to rally the people?

But instead there's this vision of weakness, of humility. Here was a different kind of king.

But it's not just about Jesus' humility - Jesus deliberately chooses a donkey to fulfil God's ancient promises made through the prophet Zechariah. 500 years earlier Zechariah had written:

Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion!
Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you;
righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey.
on a colt, the foal of a donkey. (Zech 9:9)

This is a royal procession; God's true righteous king, who would set his people free, is coming; but he's not like any other king. He comes not surrounded by weapons and shows

of strength; he comes weaponless, in humility, gentle and bringing salvation.

The problem with the crowds expectations wasn't that they were too big; it's that they were too small. Jesus isn't here to set up one more political movement. He's not here to defeat one empire. He's come to defeat the world's deepest and greatest enemies; not Rome or Greece or any other empire that rises and falls; but the enemies that are the root of all that's wrong in this world: sin and death and the devil. He's not come to free one nation; he's come to set up a global eternal kingdom of people from every nation.

But the people around him didn't quite see it yet - v 16 we find out that his disciples only remembered this promise in Zechariah afterwards. In the moment, the crowd were looking for a king who triumphs with a sword, not who triumphs on a donkey.

And the Pharisees are anxious about it - they're almost despairing in v 19 - 'see this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!'

The Conquering King: who gives life through death (20-26)

And then almost in direct reply to the Pharisees, the very next verse shows that the whole world *is* going after him.

v 20 - 'there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the festival.'

They were probably God-fearing greeks who wouldn't have been allowed into the heart of the temple but could come to the court of the gentiles around the outside. They approach one of Jesus' disciples, Philip, and they make this wonderful, simple request: 'Sir, we would like to see Jesus'.

And this request of the Greeks sparks Jesus into reflecting on what he's come to do, reflecting on this global kingdom he's here to set up. For these greeks to really see him, to come to him and benefit from him, this is what needs to happen.

V23 - Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

Jesus has talked about this 'hour' before; but it's always been in the future - the hour is coming.

Sort of like kids on a long car trip; 'are we there yet!??' 'No, No, No, we've literally been driving for only 2 minutes!! We're not there yet!' But then eventually the time comes when you do get there, and everyone's relieved, you peel yourself out of the car and relax.

It's kind of like that although here this coming hour isn't arriving at a family holiday; it's a coming hour that's going to lead Jesus along a very dark and painful road. And he knows it. Which is why he says this really cryptic thing in v 24:

V 24 Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.

It's a simple illustration, right? We've got lots of gardeners in our church family; but even someone as amateur as me can get the point. You can have a seed sitting there as long as you want and it just stays a seed; it's only when you bury it, when it falls to the ground and effectively dies, that it really starts to then come to new life and even produce other seeds, which will go on and produce more seeds and more seeds.

It's incredible - to think that in one seed there's potentially countless millions of other seeds that can come out from it.

But not unless it dies first. Not unless it falls to the ground and gets buried.

Jesus knows that's what's in store for him. To set up this God's global kingdom, to produce that fruit, can only come through his own falling to the ground and dying.

That's why he says down in v 27

"Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour?'"

Jesus knows it'd be reasonable to ask that; to ask to be saved from this hour. But such is his determined love that he doesn't

"No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. 28 Father, glorify your name!"

Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." 29 The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him.

Back in v 23 Jesus talked about his own glory; this hour would be the moment of his greatest triumph. But here this same hour would also be the moment of the Father's glory. For Jesus the Son to be glorified is for the Father to be glorified; because they share the same mission, the same love, the same plan to save and bring life.

The Conquering King: who conquers through a cross (27-36)

Which leads into this last point. This king comes in humility, he would give life through his own death; but it'd be a mistake to think that everything going on here means that Jesus is really some kind of weakling; a pushover who isn't powerful enough to stand up against the enemy.

He really is the conquering king; he really does receive all glory; it's not that Jesus is some kind of pushover.

In a massive reversal of the world's expectations, what Jesus shows here is that the cross is his hour of greatest glory. What looks like the greatest defeat is in fact the greatest victory.

John 12:30 Jesus said, "This voice was for your benefit, not mine.

So they would know the glory about what's about to happen - so that when they remember his broken body on the cross they'd see not a defeat but the victory that was so much bigger than anyone expected. They'd see God's ultimate justice:

31 Now is the time for judgment (not on the Roman Empire, but) on this world; now the prince (not of Rome but) of this world (Satan himself, the great enemy of God) will be driven out.

32 And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." 33 He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.

So there it is - this seed that looks so weak, that falls to the ground and dies; but who produces an unbelievable crop.

The crowd still don't get it, in v34 they're looking for a king, a Messiah who would remain forever, and here's Jesus talking about being lifted up to die...

But Jesus insists that darkness is coming. He is the light, God's true King who would give life and light to the world; but for a brief moment his light is going to go out. He urges them to see him while he's with them, and believe in him, to become part of his kingdom - not just another political movement but God's great eternal kingdom of people forgiven for their sin and made right with God through Jesus' life-giving death.

"We died before we came here"

In many ways we're in a different situation to this crowd; they were looking forward to Jesus' death and we look back to it. But in a really significant way Jesus words apply just as much to us. We have the light of the gospel of Jesus, testified to in the bible. If you're a Christian that light has been shone into your mind and heart and has made you a child of this light, a part of God's great family, his eternal kingdom. But where as this crowd were looking ahead to the darkness of Jesus' death; we look ahead to a different darkness; the darkness of God's final judgment. And Jesus' urging here is for us too - believe in this light while you still have it so you too can escape that darkness, so instead of having God's judgment for sin fall on you then, it can fall on Jesus instead. That's why he came, to do that for you, so you could live in his light.

But there's another really key thing Jesus says here for us though; I skipped over it but flick your eyes back to v 25

Jesus gives here this incredible, intimate insight into what he came to do. He came to conquer through love, to give his life in order to give us life.

And in v 25 and 26 he says that's the normal pattern of life for his followers too.

And just like last week it's crucial to get the ordering right. This isn't some grace-less call to heroic self sacrifice. Mary gave her greatest treasure out of wonder and thanks to the one who had given her so much, had given her her brother back. Jesus here shows just how

much he would give for all of his people.

He didn't hold on to his own life - he didn't love his own life. You could even go so far as to say he hated his own life; not in the psychological sense that so many people struggle with today; a kind of self-focussed, fearful, anxious loathing of self that leads to depression and harm. That's not what's going on here and it's not what Jesus calls us to. Jesus putting his own self aside, laying it down, wasn't driven by fear or anxiety, or even some proud need to prove himself; it was driven by love. It was driven by his self-forgetful love for his word, for his people, and if you'll receive it, for you. And unless you know that love; it's the same as last week; unless you know how deeply in need you are, how desperately helpless you are on your own because of your sin, unless you see that judgment is real and that at this hour Jesus took your judgment on himself out of his unending love for you, so you wouldn't have to face it at the coming hour; unless that is a reality for you, then you'll you'll never get v 25 and 26. You'll always resist it, you'll always keep parts of your life sectioned off from him, always serve him joylessly.

But for those who know Jesus as the one who has given you everything, without whom you have nothing; hear this strong call of your lord to follow him:

25 Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. 26 Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.

Jesus gets to our core - what is driving you? What directs your decisions? Is it your own life - your own opinions and preferences and fears, your own longings for what you think will satisfy you? If that sits at your core, if you sit on the throne of your own heart, then Jesus warns that way has no future. The way to real life, to real joy and light and the peace you long for but don't know where to get it from, is actually through giving up yourself, dying to yourself, getting off the throne of your life and surrendering it to Jesus, to the one who gave up everything for you.

In a strange way it's actually very liberating to know that this dynamic of death and resurrection is the normal experience of the Christian life.

We talked about burn out last week - about a kind of self denial that is not driven by grace but by idolatry, by need for approval or power or control. Grace means we can recognise our frailty and live within it, we can rest when we need to, we don't need to anxiously keep striving. But it'd be wrong to mistake that kind of thoughtful self care for a self-focussed life. Caring for ourselves is critical, but it's not for our own sake - it's so that we can burn on, not burn out. That's very different from the kind of self focus of our world.

Everything about our world says we want the glory without the cross, we want resurrection without death, easter Sunday without Good Friday. And it's why so many are unprepared to face the real tragedies that life in a fallen and broken world will inevitably send us. We can feel we're owed an easy life or at least a better life than we have. And we can be outraged when suffering or sacrifice comes.

But Jesus' people are experts at dying. Not just physical death - by God's grace we can be experts at that - see John 11! But experts at dying to our selves every day. You can let go of that bitterness and hurt, you can forgive; you can commit yourself to being with and serving among God's people and take on the death to self that that involves; you can serve without thought of reward or recognition; you can speak of how Jesus has given you life, dying to that fear that keeps you quiet; you can die to your own ambition, to your own comfort, your own life here and now, because you've already died with Christ! You've been crucified with him, and you no longer live, but Christ lives in you. And the life you now live in the body, you live by faith in the Son of God, who loved you and gave himself for you.

When you see this grip hold of people's lives it's inspiring, and it sparks our imaginations for how we can live this out in our own contexts. The story's told of a missionary called James Calvert, who went to the cannibals of the Fiji islands to share the news of Jesus with them. On the way there "the ship captain tried to turn him back, saying "You'll lose your life and the lives of those with you if you go among those savages." To that Calvert replied, "We died before we came here."

Here's someone who knew that Jesus had given him everything; and for him to give his life in service of Jesus was a little thing. It may not look as dramatic as that for you; but in a million little ways it's the same gospel dynamic at play:

v26 "Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me."