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John 12:12-26

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UNASSUMING ROYALTY

Many people are captivated and enamored with royalty, with people who are important and prestigious – princes and princesses, king and queens. Several years ago my wife's grandparents had the distinction of welcoming Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip on a visit to Windsor, Ontario. That touch of royalty has become part of my wife's family lore.

Newspapers, magazines and television give us daily updates on the comings and goings of people with celebrity status – where they skied, where they dined, whom they saw, what function they attended. They are sought after for pictures, autographs and interviews. Books and television programs share the stories of what makes and unmakes their lives. Some of us may have grown up secretly hoping for royal status, and although we haven't attained it, we long to be with those who have.

We associate many things with royalty – majesty, grandeur, glory, honor, prestige, opulence, aloofness and pride, just to name a few. In our text today we encounter royalty in the person of Jesus. But Jesus reflects a totally different nature and substance than we normally associate with people of high standing. We will look at John's version of the triumphal, or not so triumphal, entry of Jesus into Jerusalem.

On the next day the large crowd who had come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, took the branches of the palm trees and went out to meet Him, and began to shout, "Hosanna! BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD, even the King of Israel." Jesus, finding a young donkey, sat on it; as it is written, "FEAR NOT, DAUGHTER OF ZION; BEHOLD, YOUR KING IS COMING, SEATED ON A DONKEY'S COLT." (John 12:12-15 NASB)

Passover is the context in this scene; actually it is the third Passover we encounter in John's gospel. In chapter 11, Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. This was the final straw for the chief priests and Pharisees. We read in 11:53, "from that day on they planned together to kill Him." In the first scene in chapter 12, Mary anointed Jesus with expensive perfume. This happened six days before the Passover. Now John says that Jesus came to Jerusalem on the next day, presumably Sunday.

The large crowd present is made up of pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem for the Passover. Chapter 11 records that "many went up to Jerusalem out of the country before the Passover, to purify themselves. Therefore they were seeking for Jesus, and were saying to one another, as they stood in the temple, 'What

do you think; that He will not come to the feast at all?'" (11:55-56). To understand the size of the very large crowd present, we might refer to Josephus, who describes a Passover just before the Jewish war (A.D. 66-70) when 2,700,000 people gathered. Even if this number is exaggerated, we get the idea.

The crowd is very excited. Many of the pilgrims came from Galilee and were familiar with Jesus' ministry. In addition, there was a story circulating about Jesus bringing back to life a man who was dead. We can picture a man standing in the temple area, surrounded by a crowd, telling the story: "I saw it with my own two eyes. They rolled away the stone and this man Jesus cried out for Lazarus to come forth. And the man came out of the tomb, wrapped with the burial linens." "How can this be?" the crowd asks. Interest in Jesus had now increased to a fever pitch. Everyone in Jerusalem was on the lookout for him, eager to witness the next great sign; meanwhile the chief priests and Pharisees were eager to seize him and be rid of him.

The crowds were not disappointed. Five days before Passover, Jesus enters Jerusalem riding on a donkey. The crowd took palm branches and went out to meet him. While palm branches were not connected to Passover, they were a significant national symbol for Israel and were even stamped on coins. They were part of apocalyptic visions and were tied to messianic hopes. But more importantly, when Judas and Simon Maccabaeus rode into Jerusalem to cleanse the temple in 164 B.C., they were accompanied by branch-bearing followers, and this was picked up in the Feast of Dedication. Now Jesus is coming once again to cleanse the old temple and consecrate the true temple. Furthermore, palm branches were a widely acknowledged symbol for welcoming a king and were used to welcome victorious battle heroes. Jesus is about the wage the most important battle in human history.

The crowd shouts, even screams, "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the LORD, even the King of Israel." Hosanna was a term of acclamation or praise; it literally means "O, Save," or "give salvation now." These words are found in Psalm 118:25, which was part of the Hallel (113-118), sung each morning by the temple choir during the Feast of Tabernacles. The words that follow, "blessed is the he who comes in the name of the Lord," appear in Psalm 118:26.

Psalm 118 speaks of the Davidic king, the king of Israel who sits on the throne of David, leading a procession to the temple to give thanks to the Lord. The theme of the Psalm is "His

lovingkindness is everlasting.” The king describes himself as being surrounded by the nations, but the Lord had led a great victory and brought a great salvation, and the psalmist rejoices and praises God for the victory.

“The Lord is my strength and song,
And He has become my salvation.” (118:14)

The sound of joyful shouting and salvation is in the tents
of the righteous; (118:15)

Open to me the gates of righteousness;
I shall enter through them, I shall give thanks to the
Lord.

This is the gate of the Lord;
The righteous will enter through it. (118:19-20)

The stone which the builders rejected
Has become the chief corner stone.

This is the Lord’s doing’

It is marvelous in our eyes.

This is the day which the Lord has made;

Let us rejoice and be glad in it. (118:22-24 NASB)

The psalm ends with a call to praise and give thanks to God. Originally it was a blessing for the pilgrims, but it also carried messianic overtones. The crowd understands this to be true because they add the phrase, “even the king of Israel.” The anticipation for the Messiah and for Israel’s freedom and glory to come resulted in a spontaneous outpouring of excitement.

If you have been a part of a great celebration or ticker-tape parade, you never forget it. Some of you have been to the Rose Bowl Parade on New Year’s Day or Macy’s Parade at Thanksgiving. Perhaps you have been a part of a huge celebration for a sports team. When Nebraska won its first national championship in 1970 for football, there was huge celebration on campus. I stood outside the field house when the Presidential entourage drove up and President Nixon stepped out of the car to say some words of congratulations. I can only begin to imagine the celebrations that took place when World War II ended.

This is the kind of electric atmosphere that surrounded Jesus as he entered Jerusalem. The king of Israel was coming to Mt. Zion. The very presence of the God who descended on Mt. Sinai now appears in flesh and blood. He is the Messiah coming to his people to bring salvation, so that all the nations can give thanks to the Lord because his “lovingkindness is everlasting.”

Jesus enters to the shouts and acclamation of a huge crowd, but his arrival is a bit unorthodox. He doesn’t ride into town on a horse, sitting in the back of a convertible or high on a float. He enters Jerusalem sitting on the back of the colt of a donkey. In John’s account the choice of the donkey was not prearranged; it seems to have been made after the crowd had met him. This scene fulfills Zech 9:9, and the text is quoted with a slight variation. The phrase “do not be afraid” replaces

Zechariah’s phrase “rejoice greatly.” This is possibly from Isaiah 40:9, where Zion is the bearer of good news:

Get yourself up on a high mountain,
O Zion, bearer of good news,
Lift up your voice mightily,
O Jerusalem, bearer of good news;
Lift it up, do not fear.
Say to the cities of Judah,
“Here is your God!” (Isa 40:9 NASB)

Zechariah 9 predicts the destruction of the nations that surrounded Israel, but out of that destruction will come a remnant that will become God’s people. Peace will fill the land, prisoners will be set free and war will end. This victory will come by the arrival of a humble king who sits on the foal of a donkey, and his dominion will be “from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth” (Zech 9:10).

In the ancient world, when great ones approached a city, they arrived on a warhorse, to be greeted by the city leaders and given the key to the city. They were taken to the temple and sacrifices were offered. All of this would affirm their greatness and authority. Jesus doesn’t come on a warhorse but on a donkey. If he had come on a warhorse, the crowd would have gone wild with the prospect of an insurrection. By riding on a donkey Jesus refuses to reinforce political and nationalistic aspirations. He is not greeted by any officials but is snubbed and rejected. He could easily have led a revolt against the Romans; however, he does not come to cleanse them but to cleanse the chief priests and Pharisees. The Jews, the daughter of Zion, are acting like the nations, becoming an enemy of God’s kingdom. There is a shift: Jew/Gentile as the people of God to those who believe and those who do not believe. One day Jesus will come riding on a white horse, but for now he fulfills different Old Testament promises.

In verses 16-19 we get the reactions of three groups of people: the disciples, the crowds, and the Pharisees:

These things His disciples did not understand at the first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things were written of Him, and that they had done these things to Him. (12:16)

First, the reaction of the disciples. It’s interesting that the disciples did not understand what was going (later the Spirit would help them understand). This is similar to the statement we find in chapter 2, when Jesus cleansed the temple (verse 22). Perhaps it is a link to that event that John does not put in his story at this juncture. In fact, hardly anyone understood what was going, and this is still true of us today.

So the people, who were with Him when He called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead, continued to testify about Him. For this reason also the people went and met Him, because they heard that He had performed this sign. (12:17-18)

Second, the reaction of the crowds. There were actually two crowds, those from Bethany who had witnessed the raising of Lazarus, and those coming out from Jerusalem, motivated by reports of the miracle. The crowd is bringing glory to God and giving witness to Jesus, even though they too do not understand what is happening.

So the Pharisees said to one another, “You see that you are not doing any good; look, the world has gone after Him.” (12:19)

Third, the reaction of the Pharisees. They are very upset, sensing that political stability is becoming more and more fragile and they are losing control. Jesus could have begun an armed revolt then and there. They proclaim, “You see that you are not doing any good; look, the world has gone after Him.” They speak better than they know. Indeed the whole world will go out to Jesus. (“The world” is everyone without racial distinction.) In the next verse that very thing begins when some Greeks arrive in Jerusalem seeking to find Jesus. There is nothing the religious authorities can do to stop the kingdom of God from advancing. The efforts of the world to stop the kingdom of God have failed in every generation.

This is a very familiar story, but what is its significance? The fact that it appears in all four gospels indicates its importance. But how so? And how can we integrate this story into our lives?

1. The story fulfills Old Testament prophecy and thus helps to authenticate the gospel.

The gospel writers took great pains to validate the story of Jesus through his fulfillment of the words of the prophets. We might take that for granted, but for a Jew steeped in OT history this would be critical. It is also critical for our day too, when so many Jesus stories are becoming best sellers, books like “The Gospel According to Thomas,” “The Gnostic Gospel,” and Jeffrey Archer’s soon to be released, “The Gospel According to Judas, by Benjamin Iscariot.” It is important for the church to maintain the truth of the gospel and the truth as it is in Jesus.

Here is a quote from an editorial in the San Jose Mercury News, January 10th, 2007, written by John Yates and Os Guinness, describing their reaction to revisionism in the Episcopal Church and the decision made by their particular church to sever ties with the American Episcopal Church:

The core issue for us is theological: the intellectual integrity of faith in the modern world. It is thus a matter of faithfulness to the lordship of Jesus whom we worship and follow. The American Episcopal Church no longer believes the historic, orthodox Christian faith common to all believers. Some leaders expressly deny the central articles of the faith – saying that traditional theism is “dead,” the incarnation is “nonsense,” the resurrection of Jesus is a fiction, the understanding of the cross is “a barbarous idea,” the Bible is “pure propaganda” and so on.

The world wants to revise the story more to their liking, but the church must maintain the historical Jesus and orthodox faith. This story of Jesus is the beginning of the events leading to his crucifixion. It shows that he himself entered Jerusalem and initiated these dreadful events because his hour had come.

2. The story reveals Jesus’ identity as the Messianic King.

Up until this point, Jesus had remained hidden and had shunned the excitement of the crowds. But at this juncture he allows the people to exalt him as their Messianic King. He is claiming his identity as their king, the king who will sit on the throne of David, the king who leads the people into the worship of God. The theme of Jesus being the king of Israel will be repeated throughout the rest of John’s gospel.

The theme of a coming king is not just seen in the gospels but throughout the entire Bible. Adam was given the assignment of being God’s vice-regent on earth. God told Adam, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” But Adam failed. Israel was designed to be Yahweh’s vice-regent, acting on earth as his representative, but Israel didn’t fulfill this role. There always was the promise of the Messiah who would reign as God’s king. God promised David that he would have a son who would be a great king and would build a temple. Solomon was not that son, but Jesus is. He is God’s son and the Messianic king who sits on the throne of David. Eventually, every knee will bow to his kingly dominion.

But this king is cut from a different cloth than any other king the world has ever known. The nature of this king is one of humility and lowliness. He doesn’t ride a warhorse, with great pomp and circumstance. He does not seek to glorify himself with wealth and glamour; he rides a donkey in abject humility. He enters Jerusalem to the shouts and acclaim of thousands of people, but he comes in order to die. His coronation will take place on a cross.

Paul describes the humility of Jesus in the book of Philippians:

although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Phil 2:6-8)

Isaiah says:

**“He has no stately form or majesty
That we should look upon Him,
Nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him.” (Isaiah 53:2 NAS95S)**

More often than not, God’s people really want a king seated on a warhorse. We want the USC Trojans – power and might and wealth. We want Jesus to flex his muscles, to call down

the thunder, to make visible the might of God's kingdom. We want to ride in the victory celebration. Many churches and spiritual leaders succumb to the wishes of the crowd to give them what they desire. But our king, Jesus, is doing something different. The disciples couldn't see it, the crowds couldn't see it and the Pharisees couldn't see it. But hopefully, this gospel story helps us to see the nature of our king and his kingdom.

3. The story gives us a sense of our significance, our mission, and a model to emulate.

Significance. Jesus is the king, the king of kings. But the Scriptures say that as believers are in Christ we too are princes and princesses, reigning with Jesus. In Ephesians, Paul says that we have been made alive with Christ, raised with Christ, and seated with Christ in the heavenly places (Eph 2:1-10).

One of the biggest desires of our heart is have a significant life. We want our lives to count for something. We want to leave a legacy, leave our stamp on the world, leave something behind. Because we are united with Jesus we have gained the significance and the importance that our hearts desire. We don't have to try and achieve this in the world by climbing the corporate ladder, accumulating wealth or making friends in high places. This sense of importance and royal standing are a gift to us in Jesus.

Mission. As a result of the position we have in Christ we are God's vice-regents, his kingdom representatives here on earth. We are reclaiming the divine commission given by God to Adam and Eve in the garden to subdue and rule over creation. We are furthering the kingdom of God by being agents dispensing grace and justice in the way that God does. We care about the things he cares about. We restrain evil in our society by being a voice of the word of God.

One of the things that royalty means for us is that we are not victims in the same way that Jesus was not a victim when he rode into Jerusalem. We are not the victims of our society or background. If we are to rule over creation, then we are now able to rule over our passions, our bodies and our emotions. Through the Holy Spirit we are able to be what we were intended to be before the fall.

Model. Our model is Jesus. We do not rule and further the kingdom through wealth and power. We too ride on donkeys. We are so confident of who we are in Christ that we don't need to drive a Porsche or a Mercedes; we can take the Studebaker. We are so confident of who we are that we don't have to clamor for attention or honor or glory. We are unassuming royalty in the same way Jesus was. We leave our mark through humility and beauty of character.

Here is how my friend Pat Harrison describes humility:

- don't think of yourselves as better than others because you are better at something that you do
- never try to make a name for yourself by virtue or humility
- be content that others think little of you
- do good things in secret and in silence
- be content to be unnoticed; don't worry that you are slighted or undervalued
- never try to evoke praise or elicit a compliment
- don't ask others to tell you your faults with the goal of hearing your virtues
- don't seek out flatterers to take your side
- praise others; never disparage them; take delight in the good that others are doing
- don't compare yourself with others except to do better
- give thanks for your own imperfections, weaknesses, faults; accept as a gift from God a thorn in the flesh to keep you from pride
- don't expose others' weaknesses in order to elevate self
- don't excuse your mistakes
- remember what is most important to God is submission to Him
- be willing to endure whatever His will brings to you; be content in whatever state He puts you in
- be willing to make any change He makes

As I studied this text I kept thinking of Rudyard Kipling's famous poem *If*, and its description of what makes a man. This is one of the qualities:

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with kings – nor lose the common touch,

Perhaps Mother Teresa sums it up best in these words: "If we were humble, nothing would change us – neither praise nor discouragement. If someone were to criticize us, we would not feel discouraged. If someone were to praise us, we would not feel proud."

Jesus is the true Messianic King. Like Jesus, we too are royalty, but it is undercover work. We are secret agents, riding on donkeys.

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen. (1 Tim 1:17)

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