

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Palm Sunday		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	1		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Matthew 11:2-6, 21:1-11		
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RECOGNIZING JESUS

Palm Sunday marks the beginning of what is traditionally known as Holy Week. The first day of Holy Week¹ and the Sunday before Easter commemorates Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. "In view of the unanimous witness of the four Gospels," as Ridderbos comments, "Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was clearly a messianic display. Jesus Himself invited it, and the crowds responded with shouts of joy. It is true that the disciples did not yet realize that the special way in which Jesus entered the city was a fulfillment of the prophecy in Zechariah 9 (see John 12:16). Nevertheless, the jubilant cries with which Jesus was welcomed were clearly a royal tribute (see Mark 11:10; Luke 19:38; John 12:13), and the shouts of *Hosanna to the Son of David* (v. 9) show that the people regarded Jesus as nothing less than the Messiah and King. All this evinces a remarkable change in Jesus' previous desire to keep His messianic identity strictly secret. As with the blind men at Jericho, Jesus now allowed His disciples and the people at large to call Him the Son of David and the King of Israel as loudly as they wanted it. It even seems that He deliberately invited their messianic proclamation."² Morris observes, "The crowd shouted, *Hosanna to the Son of David*; this must be understood as an expression of exultation and honor. Matthew has just told his readers that two blind men used the title *Son of David*, and we must see the same messianic significance here. The crowds were exultant that Jesus was symbolically declaring his messiahship (and they took insufficient notice of the significance of his riding on a donkey). They follow this with, *blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord* (cf. Ps. 118:26). To come *in the name* of anyone, was to come in some sense representing him and to come in order to set forward his purposes. The crowds proclaim Jesus as God's representative, one who would set forward the divine purpose. Luke and John both include *the king* in this part of the crowd's cry, and although Matthew does not use the expression it is implied. It was because they foresaw a Galilean King that the crowd of pilgrims got so excited. They cried *Hosanna* once again, and this time added *in the highest*. It is an enthusiastic cry and probably means that Jesus is to be praised everywhere, right up to heaven itself."³

"*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever* – this text has been a source of comfort and encouragement for Christians down through the centuries. It expresses the great truth of the Savior's unfailing reliability. But, as Hughes points out, "While it is a truth which applies to all ages and generations, it is not a statement in isolation; it belongs to the context in which it appears, and accordingly we must first seek its significance within this particular setting. The point would seem to be that, in the case of the original recipients of this letter, he who *yesterday* was the source and object of the triumphant faith of those leaders who instructed them in the word of God (see the preceding verse) is still *today* the same all-sufficient and all-powerful Redeemer and Lord, and will continue so *forever* . . . Moreover, as many commentators have pointed out, the contextual connection is not only with what precedes but also with what follows; for, if Jesus Christ is unchanging, so also is the truth concerning him, with the consequence that there can be no place for differing and discordant doctrines (see next verse). In him we have the completion as well as the source of our faith (v. 2 above). The constancy of Jesus Christ, already announced in the opening section of the epistle (1:11f.), implied throughout, and now reaffirmed here, is inseparable from the constancy of his word."⁴ Unfortunately, many evangelicals have a very distorted or poorly informed understanding of the Jesus of Scripture. People put together an amazing mosaic mental picture of Jesus derived from popular cultural sources (songs, slogans, paintings, etc.) and end up with a *Jesus* that bears little, if any, resemblance to the Jesus of Scripture. Paul warned the Corinthians about the danger of worshipping a *false*

Jesus (2 Cor. 11:4). Philip Yancy has captured some of these popular misconceptions which include Jesus as Mister Rogers, a New Age Hippie, in an eastern mystic, a political revolutionary, and even as someone who personified the agenda of the gay liberation!⁵ Of course there has been attempts at sanitizing the Jesus of the New Testament in order to make him more appealing to the modern mind. Strenuous efforts are made to strip away the theological substance of what the Scriptures say about Jesus and simply recognize him as a great religious leader and role model. John Stuart Mill, the political economist, was strongly opposed to Christianity, but spoke of Jesus as being *in the very first rank of men of sublime genius of whom our species can boast. When this preeminent genius is combined with the qualities of probably the greatest moral reformer and martyr to that mission who ever existed upon earth, religion cannot be said to have made a bad choice in pitching upon this man as the ideal representative and guide of humanity.* The French humanist Ernest Renan said of Jesus, *His beauty is eternal. . . Jesus is in every respect unique and nothing can be compared with him.* David Friedrich Strauss, a German theologian who delighted in trying to tear the New Testament narratives to ribbons, conceded that Jesus *remains the highest model of religion within the reach of our thought.*⁶ The Jesus that we find in the pages of the New Testament is uniquely different from the popular Jesus that is commonly portrayed on the posters and coffee cups on display in the typical Christian bookstore. Are you ever troubled about Jesus? Does He ever *perplex* you? Are you wondering at His methods? Or, to put it another way, do you have *doubts* about the Lord? Our word *doubt* is derived from the Latin word *dubitare*, which in turn has its root meaning in the word “two;” two-ness or double-ness of mind. As Os Guinness puts it, “The heart of doubt is a divided heart.”⁷ Doubt is *not* unbelief. We can put the matter in this way: to believe is to be in one mind; to disbelieve is to be of another mind, but to doubt is to be *between* the two.”⁸ Doubt is a halfway point and can go in either direction. Doubt can actually lead on to a deepened faith, or it can break down to unbelief. None of us are immune to doubt. Christians throughout the history of the church have had to overcome their doubts. It surprises many people to read that even John the Baptist (of whom Jesus said “among them that are born of women, there hath not arisen a greater than John the Baptist;” Matt. 11:1) came under a cloud of doubt.⁹

- I. **JOHN’S IMPRISONMENT.** According to the Jewish historian Josephus, John was imprisoned by Herod in the fortress of Machaerus, east of the Dead Sea.¹⁰ Matthew simply informs us that John was arrested (4:12). The circumstances are given in 14:3-5. Apparently, John’s imprisonment lasted at least a year, maybe 18 months, since it corresponds with Jesus’ extensive Galilean ministry. John’s prison was in all likelihood a cistern, which served as a dungeon. This cistern was of considerable depth, with no accessible light except through small holes in the cover at the top. We have to remember that John was what we would call the rugged, outdoors type. Now he is confined in a deep, damp, hot, dark hole. Only a short distance is Herod’s luxurious palace. Perhaps John can hear the shouts of wild revelry and drunken merriment.
- II. **JOHN’S INQUIRY.** Verse 2 states that John heard about “the works of Christ.” This phrase lit. means, “what Christ was doing” (NIV), a reference not only to the miracles but also Jesus’ teaching. Also the use of “Christ” is significant, for it highlights Matthew’s point – that Jesus is indeed the Christ. The question that John sends to Jesus is, in the Greek text, very emphatic, “Thou, art thou the one who was to come” – lit. He who is coming (Heb. 10:37), i.e., the Messiah (cf. Ps. 40:7; Ps. 118:26). Note particularly the expression, “or should we look for another.” The word trans. “another” (KJV), “somebody else” (NIV, NASB), is the Greek word *heteron* implying that John expected Messiah to be doing something different than that which was characteristic of Jesus. Why would John ask this question? We must go back to the Baptist’s preaching. John declared that Messiah was coming and referred to Him in terms of judgment (cf. Matt. 3:11-15). Where were the ax, fan, and holy wind and fire of judgment? On the contrary, Jesus was exercising a ministry of mercy, healing, and went about teaching in parables. How does this square with John’s message? John’s question was out of a keen honest, puzzled soul, and he was perplexed at the methods that Christ had adopted.
- III. **JESUS’ RESPONSE.** If we find John’s question surprising, we are even more surprised at the answer of Jesus. But we must note carefully the Lord’s gentle method in dealing with the sincere perplexity

of his faithful servant. He describes His work in terms of a threefold movement that has an ascending scale of value.

- A. **Healing.** “The blind . . . the lame. . . the lepers . . . the deaf . . .” This is not presented simply as a quotation from Isa. 35:5-7, but as a series of miracles given in the OT to certify the Messiah. They are his credentials.
- B. **Resurrection.** “The dead are raised.” In Luke’s account, John’s question to Jesus is immediately preceded by the raising of the Widow of Nain’s son (7:11-18). Note that Jesus not only dealt with the effects of sin on the body but with the ultimate effect of sin – death. “Death,” said G. Campbell Morgan, “is the issue of everything else, of sin, and of sickness, and of sorrow.”¹¹
- C. **Evangelization.** The climax might surprise us, but the proclamation of the Gospel is Jesus’ principal work. This too is rooted in the OT concept of Messiah (cf. Isa. 61:1; comp. w/Luke 4:18), where Jesus states its fulfillment). In essence, all of these constitute what H.A.W. Meyer has called Jesus’ *resume*.¹²

IV. **JESUS’ BENEDICTION.** “Blessed is the man who does not stumble because of Me.” The word trans. “stumble” (NASB), “offended” (KJV), “fall away” (NIV) is the word *skandalizō* (from which our English word *scandal* is derived). This word is used in various ways. It can mean (1) to cause to stumble, cause to sin, cf. Lk. 17:2; Rom. 14:21; 1 Cor. 8:13; 2 Cor. 11:29; (2) to obstruct another’s path, i.e., to cause to reject or forsake, Matt. 11:6, 13:21, 57, 15:12, 24:10, 26:21, 33. Its usage here means to be misled so that Jesus is rejected because He is not conforming to expectation. In effect Jesus tells John’s disciples to go back and tell John to look again at the things that are puzzling him. Jesus is doing the work foretold by the OT prophets. Jesus *is* fulfilling God’s purpose and He will eventually fulfill what John proclaimed – He will bring judgment (note the context of Isa. 61:1-5).

CONCLUSION: Is it not the case that our greatest disappointments come because of misguided or misunderstood expectations? We are called to *trust* in the Lord. We are *not* called to always understand – which, it seems, is what we often expect. We want to have a complete understanding of God’s ways. J. I. Packer has captured this in a beautiful illustration in his classic *Knowing God*. Packer uses the York train station in England as his illustration. Unless you are privileged to be up in the high-ups of the signal box where the entire diagram of the various tracks are in complete view, you could have little, if any, concept of the overall movements of the trains. Packer goes on to warn that this is how many people *expect* to understand God’s providence in dealing with His people, and they end up baffled because things do not go as they expect.¹³ The storms of life will come and go. Dark nights will invade the soul and threaten to overwhelm us. The Lord Jesus calls us to commit ourselves to His sovereign and loving care. Note His parting words in Matt. 28:20 in “the Great Commission.” He assures His disciples that He will “always” be with them. This expression, *pasas tēs hēmeras*, lit. “the whole of every day,” is referred to in the Greek grammar as the accusative of respect. This means that Jesus has promised to be with His own on every kind of day, regardless of type of day, be it good or bad – Jesus will never leave us alone (cf. Heb. 13:5). It is a call to candid realism about the storms of life and the stress of doubt. It is a call to trust the One who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. The epistle to the Hebrews repeatedly affirms the uniqueness of Christ, as Raymond points out, “This may be seen from the fact that, as a *Son-revelation* and the final and supreme Word of God to man (Heb. 1:2), he is the Heir of all things and the Father’s Agent in creating the universe. He abodes as the perfect Radiance of God’s glory and the *very Image of his nature* (v. 3). As God’s Son, he is superior to the angels, such that it is appropriate that they be commanded to worship him (v. 6). He is the Yahweh and the Elohim of Psalm 102, who eternally existed before he created the heavens and earth (Heb. 1:10), and who remains eternally the same though the creation itself should perish (1:11-12; see 13:8).”¹⁴ The force of all this is summed up by Harris, “So also the eternality of Christ’s reign implies the immutability of his person.”¹⁵

ENDNOTES

- ¹ R. T. France points out that *Holy Week*, “in fact took place over a period of several months, and that the dramatically swift build-up of the confrontation with which we are familiar owes more to the literary skill of Mark than to historical fact. The Fourth Gospel, however, is quite explicit in dating all these events during the week leading up to Passover (Jn. 12:1, 12), and while the shout of Hosanna, the palms (only in John!) and other features would be appropriate to the other festivals, there is no reason to regard them as exclusively tied to those festivals, or as improbable also in the *carnival* atmosphere of the build-up to Passover and in connection with the arrival of Messianic king.” Cf. his *Matthew: The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Eerdmans, 1985) p. 287.
- ² H. N. Ridderbos, *Matthew: Bible Student Commentary* (Zondervan, 1987), p. 377.
- ³ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew: The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1992), p. 523.
- ⁴ P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary On the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Eerdmans, 1977), p. 570.
- ⁵ P. Yancy, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Zondervan, 1995), p. 19.
- ⁶ As cited by John Blanchard, *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?* (Evangelical Press, 1989), p. 23.
- ⁷ Os Guinness, *Doubt* (Lion Publishing, 1987), p. 17.
- ⁸ The concept is captured in other languages as well. The Chinese speak of a person with “a foot in two boats: and the Navajo Indians of “that which is two with a person.” Cf. Guinness, op. cit., and his article in *Doubt and Assurance*, ed. R. C. Sproul (Baker, 1993), p. 33.
- ⁹ Many of the early Church Fathers and some of the Protestant Reformers as well as the highly-respected C. H. Spurgeon, contend that John the Baptist himself never had any doubts, rather he wished to have his *disciples’* doubts dealt with by Jesus. Verse 4, “go and tell John,” would seem to favor the interpretation that it was indeed John who was in doubt.
- ¹⁰ *Antiquities of the Jews* (XVIII, v. 2), in the *Works of Josephus*, trans. By Wm. Whiston (rpt. Hendrikson, 1980), p. 382.
- ¹¹ G. Campbell-Morgan, *The Crises of the Christ* (Revell, 1933), p. 297.
- ¹² H. A. W. Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Hand-Book On the Gospel of Matthew* (Funk & Wagnalls, 1990), p. 270. Calvin, in his usual way, points out, “For as we are by nature proud, we reckon hardly anything precious unless it is adorned with great splendour. But the Church of Christ is a collection of poor little human beings; nothing lies further from superb and splendid beauty. The reason why many despise the Gospel is because it is not accepted by some of the great and important ones. How perverse and wrong this reckoning is Christ teaches us from the nature of the Gospel itself, that is intended only for the poor and lowly. From this it follows that it is nothing new or disturbing if it is despised by all the great. They are so filled with their riches that they leave no place vacant for God’s grace. Indeed, even if it is rejected by the greater part of mankind, this is not surprising, for there is scarcely one in a hundred who is not puffed up with a depraved confidence. But in the way He vindicates His Gospel from contempt, Christ shows who are fit to receive the grace of salvation offered in it. In this way He sweetly invites wretched sinners to the hope of salvation and raises them to assured trust.” *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries II* (Eerdmans, 1972), p. 4.
- ¹³ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (IVP, 1973), p. 94.
- ¹⁴ R. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Thomas Nelson, 1998), p. 275.
- ¹⁵ M. J. Harris, *Jesus As God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* (Baker, 1992), p. 214.