

"PALM SUNDAY EXPECTATIONS"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION According to Matthew's Gospel, Jesus made only one trip to Jerusalem, and that at the end of His life. And this seems strange when you consider that Palestine's a small land with only one major city, Jerusalem. It was not that hard a trip to make from any point in the land for all roads led there. But He had never made the journey. You'd think that a man who had spent three years traveling the roads of Palestine would eventually make it up to Jerusalem. So if He doesn't go there, perhaps He's avoiding it. He doesn't want to face that scene; evidently what happened on Palm Sunday He knew would happen and He didn't want to face it.

JERUSALEM: NO ORDINARY CITY Jerusalem is no ordinary city. It was the Holy City. The devout Jew of that day knew that to pray in Jerusalem was to pray in the very presence of God. They also believed that the heavenly Jerusalem - the prototype for the city of mankind - rose immediately above the earthly city, resting up there in the heavens, waiting to come down on that final day. Waiting, in the beautiful Biblical metaphor, "like a bride adorned for her husband".

This is no ordinary city. Jerusalem was eight hundred years old by the time of Jesus, founded by the great King David when he united all of the tribes of Israel together as one nation. Those were the "glory days" of the Kingdom of Israel, known only in David's time and not since, not even today have they known the kind of unity and oneness as a people that they knew almost three thousand years ago under King David. After David, the city was besieged many times, destroyed twice and rebuilt, then reoccupied again. And so over the years a free Jerusalem, a liberated Jerusalem, became the symbol of the world becoming the way God wants it to be. The city became a metaphor for the Kingdom of God.

Jerusalem was no ordinary city. It was and is today a city of great expectations, and Jesus did not want to go there. In His day the pilgrims flooded the city annually for the great festivals of the Jewish faith, especially for the great festival of Passover. Each year they would arrive in Jerusalem with great expectations. Maybe this will be the year when the Messiah will return and restore the greatness to the city of Jerusalem. Maybe this is the year.

THAT EXPECTATION That expectation had been building for over a hundred years, ever since the brothers Maccabee had mounted a successful revolt against the Greeks and thrown them out of the city. But now the Romans were there, taking up where the Greeks left off, one oppression after another. So every year the devout Pilgrims, all during this 100 year period, would make their way to the Holy City in great expectation that Judas Maccabeus, their liberator would come again or somebody like him. And just as he had thrown the Greeks out, someone else will now drive the Romans out of Jerusalem.

That's why they carried palm branches and leaves. They brought them every year to Jerusalem. For the palm branch was the symbol of liberation and freedom and revolution, like the upraised fist in our day. It had its origin back in the days of the Maccabees and was connected with the cleansing of the Temple following Greek desecration of it. It was the symbol of their hope and expectation, their great expectation that this will be the year when God will answer their prayers and liberate the city. Every year the expectation and the intensity of it kept increasing. Pilgrims carrying palms and marching to Zion.

JESUS DID NOT WANT TO GO

We begin to see why Jesus did not want to go to Jerusalem. For three years He went around it, avoided it. He didn't want to face that crowd. He knew what it would be like. He knew what they would do. And so He tried to buy time, hoping to change their minds about Him, their expectations, trying to teach them to see Him the way He wanted to be seen and not the way they expected Him to be, but the way He really was.

So for three years He taught, "Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are the pure in heart. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are the merciful." And He taught parables about how the Kingdom would come and said it would be like a farmer sowing seed in his field. He said, "I am that farmer and the Kingdom is being sown by Me. It is not coming abruptly and in its fullness, not like some great military victory, but coming quietly, as seed grows in the field."

And He said, "The Kingdom is like a King who threw a banquet and invited all the wrong guests, all those people whom you wouldn't be seen with". "So" He said, "There will be surprises in the Kingdom when it comes. You will see there people that you wouldn't expect to be there, because the Kingdom of God is a time of reconciliation, a time of reunion, a time when all of God's people come back together". And then He illustrated it in His own life by eating with sinners and outcasts, and forgiving people who did not believe they could ever be forgiven. He said, "That's what the Kingdom is like. It's a time of forgiveness, a time of reconciliation, a time of renewal, and not a time of destruction and punishment."

For three years He taught that, hoping, I imagine, that He could change their minds about who He was and about what would happen when the Messiah comes. He hoped to show them that the Messiah had come to love and not to conquer, come to forgive and not to punish, come to establish a Kingdom of peace and love, not a Kingdom of might and power.

So when the time comes and He can't put it off any longer He must go to Jerusalem. He plans His entrance so as to confound their expectations. He knew that they would be waiting for Him with the palm leaves, looking for a Judas Maccabeus on a horse. So He chose to enter the city on a donkey, to confound their expectations. They were looking for a conquering warrior, He came as a prince of peace, fulfilling the beautiful Prophecy of Zechariah:

"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem. Lo, your king comes to you, humble and riding on an ass...to cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem".

He came not to wage war, but to bring peace. That's the way He entered Jerusalem that day long ago, saying, "I am not Judas Maccabeus. He came with an army. I have come to put an end to all armies." And as He feared, they paid no attention to Him. They waved their palm branches as signs of the military liberation. They shouted hosanna, as they had been rehearsing all those years waiting for the day when God would send His servant to redeem the city, to set it free from its enemies. They did not see who God sent. They saw only who they wanted Him to send. They were not interested in His message, but only interested in what He could do for them.

And so both Matthew and Luke say that it was after He entered the city on that Palm Sunday that He retreated to a hill overlooking the city, the city with its great expectations that before nightfall had set in motion plans to reject Him.

Luke says that He said this: "Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace!" Matthew records that when He climbed the hill and wept over the city He cried, "O Jerusale, Jerusalem. How often would I have gathered you as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you would not."

THIS IS THE STORY, THEN.. This is the story, then, of Palm Sunday. Yes, for three years He avoided going there because He knew what would happen and what their expectations would probably be. He saw rejection for He sensed they were waiting for somebody else, somebody who would fulfill their desires and He had come to fulfill God's desire for them. So for Him to be what God wanted Him to be, He had to reject who the people wanted Him to be.

Throughout His ministry, He resisted what the crowd wanted Him to be, and even at the end He resisted what the disciples wanted Him to be, and turning to Peter, said, "Get thee behind me, Satan."

And now - one more chance, on this Palm Sunday...at the entrance to the Holy City with all of its expectations. One more chance to accept Him for what He is. He rides into the city on a donkey, saying, "I am the prince of peace". Before the week is over, they say, "We don't want you. We want Judas Maccabeus, the man of war". And the cries of Good Friday coming closer, "Give us Barabbas. Crucify Him". "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem...would I have gathered you as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you would not".

WHO IS HE FOR YOU Who is He for you? That's the question that Palm Sunday always forces us to consider. Who is He for you? For He still enters the city. That is to say, He still comes to us, and still can enter your life and mine to fulfill the expectations that God has for us. He may go against the dreams we have set for ourselves; there may be times when He has to say "no" to us. He may have to reject our expectations of Him...in order to fulfill His mission for us.

And that means that the evidence of His coming will not be that the world about us is changed the way we would desire. It will mean that we are changed, even though the world about us is not. It will not mean that our desires are fulfilled so that at least we can be happy. It will mean that we can be happy even though our desires remain unfulfilled. That will be the evidence that we have received Him as King into our lives. It's important that we see this.

SHALLOW NEEDS / DEEP NEEDS A man named Jourard wrote a book, entitled, Transcendent Behavior, in which he said there are shallow needs and deep needs in each of us. And the problem with most of us is that we elevate those shallow needs to an ultimate status and give them top priority in our lives. The shallow needs are the desire for security and for comfort, and we think these are the most important things in life. But, said the author, there are other needs deep down inside each of us. There's a need to go "beyond ourselves", the need to "transcend ourselves", the need to become something greater than we are now. Those are the genuinely human needs - the needs that God has placed in us so that we will become the men and women that He created us to be.

He writes: "That deeply religious persons report that they experience God as the Being who calls us to transcendent experience". That's what God is in the lives of genuinely religious people. He's the Being who calls them into those kinds of challenging "transcendent experiences" - to go beyond themselves, to

become something greater than they are right now - to be renewed, redeemed, to have a new life as the result of some adversity in life. And I believe that's how He comes to us today.

He comes to us not to fulfill the desires that we have for ourselves. He comes to fulfill the desires that God has for us, to satisfy those deep needs in each of us.

#### CHARIOTS OF FIRE

One of the finest movies of the past year and a half is "Chariots of Fire". How many of you have seen it? It's a great movie...the story of Eric Liddell and Harold Abrams, and their feats in the 1924 Olympics in Paris. Eric Liddell, the Scots runner, was the son of a missionary. He himself became a missionary after the Olympics and sent to China and there, incidently, died in a Japanese concentration camp in World War II. He postponed entering his religious vocation in order to train and compete in the '24 Olympics. He explained his motivation to his sister in these words, "God has given me the gift to run; I believe it pleases Him to see me run."

I believe that God has given all of us this "gift of transcendence" - to go beyond ourselves, to become greater than we are now, to achieve those great expectations He has for us. And it pleases Him to see us do that. For instance, I believe that God has given us the gift of creativity - the arts, music, whatever - and it pleases Him to see us create. I believe He has given us the gift of thinking and it pleases Him to see us thinking. I believe that He has given us, too, the gift of endurance and it pleases Him to see us face adversity or whatever in life and to not run away from it, but to become "more than conquerors" through it. And I believe that is why Jesus came to this world and why He resisted being who we wanted Him to be, drawing strength from those inner resources that we have talked about during Lent - because if He had not resisted us, He would not have challenged us to become what God wants us to be!

#### CLOSING OF SERMON

The title of the film, "Chariots of Fire" comes from a poem by William Blake. I wonder if any of you know what one. It's a poem about England, called "A New Jerusalem" - a great poem. And it's a happy coincidence for this sermon and this text when we are talking about Jerusalem. The poem's about England and it envisions England as being visited and blessed and enriched by Christ's lifting presence. It says because England has been touched by Christ, England must now become greater than she was before.

I think that the movie "Chariots of Fire" is a celebration of that spirit in two young Britishes - one a Christian, one a Jew - that spirit, if you will of transcendence, that spirit that entices us and motivates us in ways beyond our understanding to become something greater, something more than we are right now.

It's a poem that has significance beyond England. For it affirms that because Christ has come into this world, the world is now destined to become greater than it ever was before. Because Christ has visited this world, the world must now become Jerusalem - the Holy City, the Kingdom of God. The expectations of Palm Sunday are great, standing at the entrance to Holy Week and the momentous events which this week brings to mind once again. Hear the poem:

"And did those feet in ancient time  
Walk upon England's mountains green?  
And was the Holy Lamb of God  
On England's pleasant pastures seen?"

And did the countenance divine  
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?  
And was Jerusalem builded here  
Among these dark satanic mills?

Bring me my bow of burning gold!  
Bring me my arrow of desire!  
Bring my my spear! O clouds, unfold!  
Bring me my chariot of fire!

I will not cease from mental flight,  
Now shall my sword sleep in my hand  
Till we have built Jerusalem  
In England's green and pleasant land."

Dear friends in Christ, to know that He has come to our world is to be denied rest until our lives and our land, this city, this world become Jerusalem - the city of God. The expectations of Palm Sunday are high. To receive Him, or to reject Him as He comes to us once again - to the city. The decision is ours to make. What will your answer be?

PRAYER O God, Father of our spirits and Father of us all - make us sensitive to your nearness in these moments as we celebrate this Day of Decision in the lives of people in the city. May we respond to his coming, asking ourselves those difficult questions: if not now, when? If not here, where. Loose the Hosannas that stick in our sophisticated throats. And let the child in each of us come alive again that we may place our well-pressed garments in the pathway of the King and follow Him all the way.

In His name we pray.