

Like a Weaned Child
Psalm 131 – John 12:12-19

Pride. That's what the Jerusalem crowd was feeling on Palm Sunday. Finally, the King of Israel was showing up, just as all the prophets had said He would. Finally, they would be able to drive out those murderous Romans who taxed them and looked down on them because of their faith. Finally, their nation would be able to resume their rightful place in the world – a dominant power in the region, as they had been in the days when David was king. Yes, with a miracle-working Messiah at their head, they'd be able to show those Romans a thing or two. It's no wonder that they carpeted Jesus' path with palm branches – nothing was too good for the Son of David.

Pride. That's what Jesus' disciples were feeling on that day. Ever since they had come to the correct conclusion that He was indeed the promised Messiah, they had been indulging their wildest fantasies about sharing the power they expected Him to wield. As late as the Last Supper later that week, they would continue to jockey for position, arguing about which of them would be the greatest of His ministers, generals and counsellors. And so as they basked in the Lord's reflected glory on Palm Sunday, they were confident that all of them, in one way or another, would wield power and influence in His Kingdom which was soon to be revealed.

Pride. That's what the chief priests and scribes and Pharisees had grown accustomed to. They had been so secure in their interpretations of the Law of Moses. They had held complete control of the Temple ceremonies which alone promised absolution for the faithful. But Jesus' teaching and miracles had earned Him quite a following, and His recent resurrection of His friend Lazarus from the dead had only served to swell their ranks. And so, when the religious leaders saw the crowds idolizing Jesus on Palm Sunday, they were filled with dread, anxious that they would lose their prominent positions, blaming each other for failing to put a stop to His meteoric rise.

Pride. Haven't we Americans become used to that too? Since 1945, we have been on the top of the heap, holding economic, military and technological power unrivalled around the globe. But as we see our jobs vanish and our economy crumble, as our health and wealth drains away at the hands of an invisible virus, aren't we just as desperate to get back on top as those chief priests were? Aren't we just as focused on all the same kinds of worldly blessings that the disciples and the Jerusalem crowd wanted?

Yes, it seems that the only one who was not proud on Palm Sunday was Jesus Himself. Instead, as John 12:14 and 15 make clear, He was intentionally acting out a rather humiliating scene described by the prophet Zechariah over 500 years previously: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout *in triumph*, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; He is just and endowed with salvation, Humble, and mounted on a donkey, Even on a colt, the foal of a donkey."

So as He rode into Jerusalem on that donkey, looking rather ridiculous as His feet dragged the ground, He was admitting that He would indeed be King, but not the kind of King everyone else craved. Regardless of what the crowds and the disciples wanted, He hadn't come to change all their worldly circumstances. Regardless of what the chief priests feared, He hadn't come to set up a worldly kingdom then and there. But no one was listening. No one really understood what made Him tick.

No one except perhaps His ancestor David. After all, David was no stranger to adulation – he had had his share of military victories and coronation ceremonies. David knew what it was like to have crowds singing his praise – “Saul has slain his thousands and David his tens of thousands.” David even knew what it was like for God to make an eternal promise to him, a promise that one of his descendants would rule over all the world forever and ever.

And yet in Psalm 131, David, like Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, refuses to lift up his heart, boasting about what he deserves. He refuses to lift up his eyes, aspiring to greater fame and fortune. David the King and Jesus the King both refused to walk the road of pride, instead choosing the way of humility. And we American Christians, however accustomed we have been to power and wealth, are now being forced to do the same thing. And who knows? If our current crisis teaches us some humility it will have done at least a little good.

Of course, this virus could just as easily lead us off in some less profitable spiritual directions. At least one non-denominational pastor in Florida has announced his absolute certainty that the virus is God’s judgment on the “godless communist government” in China, as well as on the “spiritual rebellion” in the United States, a rebellion marked by “hatred of the Bible and the hatred of righteousness.” Of course, such an overly simplistic analysis neglects the many good and godly people who are dying from this virus all over the world, including EPC pastor Tim Russell, who served on the staff of Second Pres. in Memphis. It also doesn’t explain why this virus seems to be targeting those who are the most helpless among us. No, it won’t do to assume we understand why God has allowed this virus as part of His sovereign will. We can’t read His mind, and we shouldn’t presume that we can.

At the same time, it’s just as wrong to use this plague, or any of the other great tragedies that have occurred throughout world history, to dismiss the existence of God out of hand. For to assume that if God is real He would have put a stop to this war or that plague, this storm or that flood, this addiction or that suicide is to assume that we can understand all the complexities involved in God’s plans for the world. Such an assumption is really to make gods out of ourselves.

It is also to stand with the Jerusalem crowd and the disciples on Palm Sunday. For all of them were quite certain that, since Jesus was obviously the Messiah, He was going to do what they wanted, to set up His Kingdom on Earth right then. So, when He disappointed them, when He allowed Himself to be arrested and beaten by the Romans, instead of questioning their own assumptions about what the Messiah should be and do, instead of humbling themselves before the obvious will of God, they just dismissed all the teaching and all the miracles that Jesus had done and concluded that the chief priests and scribes and Pharisees had been right all along, that Jesus wasn’t the Messiah after all. As John ruefully recalled in our responsive reading, they just didn’t understand what Jesus had come to do. Instead, they clung to their own beliefs about God, and rejected the Son of God in the process.

How different was David’s attitude. Now, he didn’t have any doubts about God’s existence – God had protected him too many times during the course of his life for there to be any room for doubt on that score. The fact that he survived his encounter with Goliath and escaped so many times when King Saul was trying to kill him should be sufficient proof to anyone that God is real and that God was watching over him.

Moreover, unlike so many of our modern so-called prophets, David could be quite certain about many of God’s plans for him and for his people. After all, the true prophet Samuel had anointed him

with oil, proclaiming that he would one day be the King of Israel. And once David became king, the prophet Nathan assured him that his house and his kingdom would be established forever. So, if anyone had good reason to be confident that he had a handle on God's will, it would have been David.

And yet in Psalm 131 he specifically refused to lay claim to any such certainty. Instead, he rejected any attempt to master what he called "great matters." He refused to try understand things that were too high, too difficult for him. Instead, David modeled the same sort of humility that Jesus displayed as He rode into Jerusalem on that donkey on Palm Sunday.

Now, make no mistake. Jesus knew exactly what would happen to Him less than a week after His Palm Sunday triumph. That's why John 12:27 records Him saying His soul was troubled, and that's why the other gospels show Him pleading in agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. He knew He was going to the cross. And He knew that when all the sin of all the world was laid upon Him there, the Father would have to reject Him. And yet, so great was His faith, so great was His love for the Father that He could say with confidence, "Not my will, but Thine be done." In His complete trust in the Father, even in the shadow of the cross He could cry out, "Father, glorify Thy name!"

In the same way, even though David didn't understand many of the things that were happening to him, even though he had been humbled so many times, even though he had absolutely no control over what was going on in his life, he continued to hope in the Lord.

And the image David uses to describe his trust helps us understand why both he and Jesus could have this kind of hope. For why is a weaned child comforted in the presence of his mother? It's not because he wants something to eat – he's outgrown the need for mother's milk. Instead, he simply rests in the certainty of her love. He rejoices just to be with her, no matter how confusing and scary the world around him may be.

And in our darkest moments, in the times when we feel most weak and most helpless, our greatest comfort is not in what God can do for us, as great as those things may be. No, our greatest comfort is simply to be in the presence of God Himself.

The first question of the Heidelberg Catechism puts it this way:

What is your only comfort in life and death?

That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from all the power of the devil. He also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, all things must work together for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit he also assures me of eternal life and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for him.

So, how can we live this life of humility? How can express hope in the presence of God with us? How can we truly follow Jesus to the cross, dying to ourselves and living only for the glory of God and for the good of others?

Well, what did David tell us? He could be humble, He could rest in the presence of the Lord because he was as certain of God's love for him as a weaned child is certain of his mother's love. And we can have that same confidence in that same love – after all, our God was willing not only to humble Himself by riding into His capital city on a donkey, but willing to go to the cross so that we might be saved. Jesus loves us enough to die for us. So, even today, can't we rest in His love?