

J. C. RYLE'S NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
12:12-19

12. On the next day many people who had come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, 13. took branches of palm trees and went forth to meet him, and cried, Hosanna! Blessed is the King of Israel who comes in the name of the LORD! 14. And Jesus, when he had found a young ass, sat on it; as it is written, 15. Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your King comes, sitting on an ass's colt. 16. His disciples did not understand these things at 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. 17. Therefore the people who were with him when he called Lazarus out of his grave and raised him from the dead, bore record. 18. For this reason the people also met him, because they heard that he had done this miracle. 19. The Pharisees therefore said among themselves, Perceive ye how ye prevail nothing? Behold, the world is gone after him!

12.--[*On the next day.*] This day must have been the Sunday before Easter, which is commonly known in England as "Palm Sunday," from the circumstance here related.

[*Many people...feast.*] This must include many of the Jews who had come up to the passover from Galilee and were doubtless well acquainted with our Lord's ministry and the numerous miracles He had worked in Galilee. Some of them, in all human probability, had formed part of the multitude whom He fed with a few loaves in the wilderness.

[*When they heard...Jerusalem.*] We must suppose that by some means our Lord's intention of coming to Jerusalem must have become known, either by Himself communicating it or by His disciples learning it and telling others. This information would be carried back to the city by those who came from thence to Bethany on Saturday. Bethany, however, was on the direct road from Jericho to Jerusalem, and the tidings of our Lord's approach may have traveled before Him for some days.

Rollock thinks this multitude must have been chiefly composed of Jews not residing in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem Jews, he thinks, are an instance of the old proverb, which he quotes, "The nearer the Church the further from God."

13.--[*Took branches...to meet him.*] The precise motive of this action we are left to conjecture. Palm branches were carried by processions attending kings or victorious generals on public occasions. The triumphant host in heaven, which John saw in vision, was composed of persons having "palms in their hands" (Rev. 7:9). It may be that some of the crowd on this occasion believed that Jesus was the Messiah. Others, we may be sure, did what the rest did, without any special motive at all. At most, we can only suppose that the multitude had a vague idea that Jesus was somebody

very remarkable--a prophet or someone raised up by God--and as such did Him honor.

Rollock thinks the custom of carrying branches at the feast of tabernacles, as the expression of joy, was the motive of the crowd here.

[*And cried, Hosanna!*] This Hebrew word is taken from Psalm 118:25 and signifies "Save now, we beseech thee."

Calvin thinks this phrase testified that they acknowledged Christ to be the Messiah, and considers that the 118th Psalm had special reference to Messiah's coming.

[*Blessed is the King of Israel, etc.*] This sentence would be more literally rendered "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, the king of Israel." It is partly taken from Psalm 118:26, but there the words are simply "Blessed be He who comes in the name of the Lord" and no mention is made of "the king." We can only conjecture that some of the multitude had a vague idea that Jesus had come to be a temporal King and a conquering Messiah who would set Israel free from all foreign dominion. These few caught up the words of the Psalm, and their cry was taken up by the many around them, perhaps without knowing distinctly what they did or said. Nothing is so soon caught up as a popular cry. From "Hosanna" to "Crucify Him" there was only an interval of a very few days! Nothing is so worthless as popular applause.

Theophylact holds decidedly that the multitude honored our Lord as God. But I cannot think it.

14.--[*And Jesus, when he had found, etc.*] That there was no chance or accident in the ass being found we know from St. Matthew's Gospel, where we read that the disciples were sent to get the ass ready (Matt. 21:7). Every step of this triumphal progress into Jerusalem was prearranged.

To ride upon an ass, we must always remember, was not so low and ignominious a mode of traveling as it may seem to us. The Eastern ass is a very different creature to the English ass--larger, stronger, and far more valuable. Asses are specially named as part of the wealth of Abraham, Jacob, and Job (Gen. 12:16, 30:43, Job 42:12). Solomon had an officer specially over the asses (1 Chr. 27:30). Abraham, Balaam, Achsah, Abigail, and the Shunamite rich woman all rode on asses. To ride on white asses was a mark of great men in the days of the Judges (Judges 5:10). The idea therefore of anything degrading in riding on an ass must be entirely dismissed from our minds.

On the other hand, it is undeniable that the ass is not the animal that a king or ruler, in any age, has ever chosen to use on public occasions in heading a procession. The horse has always been preferred. The use of an ass, we cannot doubt, was meant to show that our Lord's kingdom was utterly unlike the kingdoms of this world. No Roman soldier in the garrison of Jerusalem who (standing at his post or sitting in his barrack window) saw our Lord riding on an ass, could report to his centurion that He looked like one who came to wrest the kingdom of Judea out of the hand of the

Romans, drive out Pontius Pilate and his legions from the tower of Antonia, and achieve independence for the Jews with the sword!

The Greek word rendered "young ass" here is a diminutive, and seems used intentionally to show that it was a very young or small ass.

[*As it is written.*] By riding on an ass, our Lord had fulfilled the prophecy of Zechariah in which, 500 years before, the prophet had foretold that the King of Zion would one day appear "riding upon an ass." At the time when he prophesied this there were no kings in Jerusalem. The kingdom had ceased at the captivity. We cannot doubt that this prophecy was well known among the Scribes and Pharisees, and taken together with the fact that Daniel's 70 weeks were expiring, our Lord's entry into Jerusalem in this fashion must have raised many thoughts in their hearts.

Let it be noted that many like events in our Lord's earthly ministry were foreknown and foretold long before they happened, and with increasing minuteness and particularity as the roll of prophecy drew near to an end.

15.--[*Fear not, etc.*] It will be observed, of course, that John does not quote literally and exactly all that Zechariah said; he omits several words. The explanation is simple. He did not quote from memory only and so forget part, but he purposely only quoted that part of the prediction which was now specially fulfilled--"the riding on the ass." The object of the prophecy when it was first delivered, was to comfort the Jews in their low and decayed state after their return from Babylon by a promise of Messiah. Therefore Zechariah was taught by the Holy Ghost to say things which may be paraphrased as follows: "Fear not; be not cast down or depressed, O daughter of Zion, or inhabitants of Jerusalem. Low and depressed as your condition may be now, there will be a day when you shall have a King again. There shall come One who will ride on a certain public occasion into thy gates--a King on an ass's colt, not as a warrior with a sword in hand but as a peaceful Prince, a just and holy King better even than David, Solomon, Hezekiah, or Josiah, and bring with Him salvation for souls. Therefore think not yourself forsaken because you are poor now and have no king. Look forward to your coming King."

Let it be noted that Christ's coming, first or second, is always the great topic of comfort in prophetic writings.

16.--[*His disciples did not...at first.*] It is clear from this and other kindred passages that our Lord's own immediate followers had a very imperfect knowledge of our Lord's Person and work, and of the fulfillment of Scripture which was going on around them. Brought up amidst Jewish notions of a glorious temporal Messiah, they failed to see the full meaning of many of our Lord's doings.

Let us never forget that men may be true Christians and right hearted and yet be very ignorant on some points. "Faith," says Zwingle on this verse, "admits of degrees and increase." In estimating others, we must make great allowance for early training and associations.

[*But when Jesus was glorified.*] This must mean, as Theophylact says, our

Lord's ascension. After that time and the day of Pentecost, the minds of the disciples were greatly enlightened. Compare John 7:39: "The Holy Ghost was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified."

[*Then they remembered...written of him.*] The power of memory to see things, long after they happen, in a new light and then to recollect them vividly is very remarkable. In no case does it appear more curiously than in the rising again in our minds of texts and sermons heard long ago, which at the time apparently left no impression on us. Preachers and teachers may take comfort in this. All is not lost that they say, although their hearers and scholars may seem at the time to pay no attention. Their words in many cases shall have a resurrection. One great cause of this is that it is part of the Holy Ghost's office "to bring things to remembrance" (John 14:26).

[*And that they had done these things to him.*] The disciples found, long after the triumphant entry into Jerusalem, that they had been unconscious actors in a mighty accomplishment of Scripture. This is a thought for us all. We have not the least idea, during the greater part of our lives, how much of God's great purposes on earth are being carried on through us and by us without our being conscious of it. The full extent to which they are carried on we shall never know till we wake up in another world. We shall then discern with wonder and amazement the full meaning of many a thing in which we were unconscious agents during our lives.

Calvin remarks: "Then, after the ascension, did it occur to the disciples that Christ did not do these things rashly, and that these men were not employed in idle amusement, but that the whole transaction had been regulated by the providence of God."

Poole observes that here St. John "confesses his own ignorance." He was present and saw all that was done, but did not understand it at the time.

17.--[*Therefore the people...Lazarus...bore record.*] I feel no doubt that this verse describes one part of the multitude which met our Lord, and the following verse describes another part. One part, and of course a small one, consisted of those who had seen the raising of Lazarus. The other, and a much larger one, consisted of those who had only heard the report.

That there must have been a very large number of persons present at the miracle of Bethany is, I think, indirectly proved by the expression here used, "people that were with Him."

The words "bore record" must mean that they testified that a great miracle really had been worked, and that this same Jesus now riding on an ass before the eyes of the people was that very Person who had worked it. I do not see that we can possibly get more out of the expression, and I cannot suppose that these people testified their belief in Christ's Messiahship.

The double expression, "called out of his grave" and "raised from the dead," deserves notice. It is doubtless meant to keep before our minds the mighty simplicity of the means used by our Lord. He spoke and it was done. He "called" to Lazarus to come forth, and he was "raised" at once.

18.--[*For this reason, etc.*] This verse describes the state of mind of the larger part of the multitude which surrounded our Lord at His entry into Jerusalem. It consisted of those who had heard the report of His raising Lazarus--a story magnified, no doubt, in the telling. Strong curiosity to see the Person who had done such a miracle would call forth an immense crowd in any city. But among Jews familiar with Old Testament miracles, assembled in enormous numbers for the Passover, excited by the rumor of Messiah coming--among such we may well believe that the report of Jesus coming in from Bethany would draw together many myriads of spectators to meet Him.

The Greek words "for this reason" here seem to refer forward to the latter part of the verse and not backward to the preceding verse. Compare 10:17 where the same form of language is used.

19.--[*The Pharisees...said...ye prevail nothing.*] This is the language of men baffled, angry, and at their wits' end from vexation to see their plans defeated. Instead of finding people willing to lay hands on Jesus as a malefactor, and to deliver Him up into their power, they beheld a large multitude surrounding Him with joyful acclamations and saluting Him as a King! Of course they could do nothing but sit still and see it. The least attempt to use violence against our Lord would have raised a tumult and endangered their own lives. So they were obliged to see their most hated enemy entering Jerusalem in triumph, like Mordecai led by Haman (Esther 6:11).

"Perceive ye," I believe, should be taken as an imperative and not as an interrogative indicative. It sounds like the language of men looking on from the city walls or the temple courts as the huge procession wound slowly through the gates of the city. "Behold this sight! Behold how you do nothing effectual to stop this fellow's course! Your order to denounce Him and have Him apprehended is utterly useless and unprofitable."

Chrysostom and Theophylact think that those who said this had some faith and felt rightly, but had not courage enough to confess Christ. But I cannot agree with them. Calvin and other reformers think, on the contrary, that it was the language of Christ's enemies.

Bullinger observes that wicked men show their wickedness especially by their dislike of true religion, and their annoyance when, as in the case before us, it seems to enjoy a temporary popularity. For neglect and contempt of religion, they show no concern at all.

[*Behold, the world is gone after him!*] Some allowance of course must be made for the exaggerated language which angry and disappointed men use under the influence of passion. Nevertheless, the word "world" may not be really so extravagant as it appears at first when we consider the immense number of Jews who attended the passover feast. According to a computation made by Josephus, there were nearly three millions of people assembled on such occasions at Jerusalem. At this rate we can understand that the crowd drawn together by our Lord's public entry might well be so large as to warrant the saying, "The world is gone after him." Most of the crowd, it

may be remembered, were not dwellers in Jerusalem but strangers who were only visitors or sojourners--absent from home--and would materially swell a crowd.

In leaving this passage, it is impossible not to feel that there must have been an overruling, constraining influence on the minds of the Jewish people on the occasion of our Lord's triumphant entry into Jerusalem. This, no doubt, was an influence miraculously exercised by our Lord in order to draw all men's attention to Himself, and to make His approaching Sacrifice on the cross as public an event as possible.

Rollock observes: "A secret power of royal authority stirred up the minds of the multitude to receive Christ as a king." He also observes that it is the same power which Christ will put forth when He comes at the last day to judge the world.