

SERMON FOR PALM SUNDAY

(Cape Town - 5 April 2009)

Text: ¹² The next day the great crowd that had come for the Feast heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. ¹³ They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Blessed is the King of Israel!" ¹⁴ Jesus found a young donkey and sat upon it, as it is written, ¹⁵ "Do not be afraid, O Daughter of Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt." ¹⁶ At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that they had done these things to him. ¹⁷ Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. ¹⁸ Many people, because they had heard that he had given this miraculous sign, went out to meet him. ¹⁹ So the Pharisees said to one another, "See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!" (John 12:12-19)

If I reflect on my own Christian life over many I realise that there have been many highs and just as many lows. I grew up in a very Christian family, where it was the norm to go to church every single Sunday. I enjoyed it, but it wasn't really a high in my life. In hindsight I realise that most of time, and especially as I became a teenager, I most probably just went through the motions. My dad would announce to the family on a Sunday morning: "Let's go to church". And we would all jump into car.

For my high school days I went to a boarding school far away from home. And for the first time in my life there was no obligation whatsoever to go to church. But I did. And interestingly it was in that time that I sensed God speaking to me for the first time. I got involved in the SCA (Social Christian Association) of our school. And whenever there was visiting preacher or a big rally in our area I was the first person to go.

I was especially impressed by a "Healing Rally" held in Pietermaritzburg early in the 1970's. Some *incredible* things happened. I was experiencing the *power* of God at first hand and I was on a spiritual high as never before. During the next school holidays when I went home, I got my whole family excited.

But soon afterwards I experienced a terrible low. The healing rally that had taken place in Pietermaritzburg had moved to Piet Retief, my home town. Being so excited, I made sure that our whole extended family attended the rally. That evening a girl cousin of my mine went on stage. There on stage they discovered she had a shorter leg. A prayer was spoken and everybody was clapping and rejoicing for the healing. But we - the whole family - knew she never had a shorter leg.

I felt cheated and betrayed. And I was so confused that I almost lost my faith in God. I has a low! But do you know why this happened? The reason was, I have very specific expectations about God. My perception of God was that if only we have faith, he will heal us and solve all our daily problems. It was only much later in my life, that I realised that God never made such a promise. Yes, he does heal quite miraculously sometimes, but there is no promise that he would do so all the time. In fact, the healing of our body wasn't (or is) even central in God's mission. My expectations of God weren't based on Scripture. I had been influenced by the people around me and *their* perceptions of God.

But this prompts me to ask you the question today: What are your primary expectations of God? Or to put differently: When you for the first time consciously became aware of God, what did you expect from him?

The people in our sermon text had very fixed expectations when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem. They were hugely excited.... and rightly so. There were clear indications that the messianic age, the coming of the promised Messiah, was about to dawn on them.

Days before Jesus entered Jerusalem he was in Bethany. And something extraordinary happened. Lazarus, a friend of Jesus had died four days earlier. And after comforting the two sisters Jesus went to the grave and called his name and said: "Lazarus, come out!" And he came out. In ancient times there was a widespread belief that the coming of the Messiah and his kingdom would go hand in hand with the resurrection of the dead. And when Lazarus walked out of that tomb, the excitement of the people was almost uncontainable.

We read in our text that from Bethany a large crowd followed Jesus to Jerusalem. And as Jesus walked into Jerusalem the swelling crowd started chanting: "**Hosanna! Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord**" - which by the way is a quote from Psalm 118, a very well-known *Messianic Psalm*.

So far so good. But the crowd didn't stop with the words of Psalm 118. They added a phrase of their own. They shouted: "**Blessed is the King of Israel!**"

That sounds harmless, doesn't it? But it wasn't. In the words "King of Israel" the acclamation of the people gained an ethnic and patriotic flavour. This phrase expresses something of their own expectations regarding the Messiah. In the Messiah they expected the "king of Israel" to arrive, who would over-power the "king of Rome". Their first and primary expectation was that the Messiah would free them from Roman bondage and rule.

This is confirmed by the palm branches. We read that as Jesus entered Jerusalem, the people took "palm" branches out to meet him. Why palm branches, so rare in Jerusalem? Because the palm branch was the unofficial national symbol of Israel as the protea is for us. In the Maccabean wars, for example (150 years before Christ), when Israel regained independence, the first thing they did was to imprint their coins with palm branches. By waving the "palm" branches, they were saying: Here is our long-awaited King of *Israel* who will save us from the Romans.

But the people had false expectations. No where in Scripture is it written that the Messiah would free the Israelites from foreign rule or bondage. But that is exactly what the Israelites wanted and expected. And as the crowd grew, even those who had never given the Messiah any thought, were swept along. We call it group pressure, or mass mania.

Jesus of course saw what was happening. And he reacted immediately. When he saw the people picking palm branches and shouting, "**Blessed is the king of Israel!**", he called for a donkey. And he continued his journey riding a donkey.

Why? He was trying to tell the people: "I am coming *in peace*, not to make war." A donkey in contrast to a horse, is not a war-animal but a draft animal. A donkey is used for loading purposes. It carries people or goods. Applied: Jesus came to Jerusalem to load the sins of this world upon himself. He came to bring us salvation and eternal peace *with God*.

But the false expectations of the people had taken over. They didn't even register the symbolism of the donkey. And when a few days later their high expectations were dashed they made a 180 degree turn. The same people that had shouted: "**Hosanna. Hosanna. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord**", shouted: "**Crucify him, crucify him!**"

How is this possible? It is possible because their faith was based on false expectations. The large crowd had been swept along by the excitement of a few. But the premises of their excitement were all wrong. They never searched the Scriptures and never noted what the actual promises of God were.

It was only much later, after the resurrection, when the hype had settled, that they remembered the words of the prophet Zechariah. ***“Do not be afraid, O Daughter of Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey’s colt”*** (v.15). The story of donkey was there all along. The primary reason for the Messiah’s coming, was to take the sins of this world upon himself and to reconcile us with the Father.

We miss the point on Palm Sunday, when we just see the Palm branches. The palm branches only make sense if we place them around the cross. That is where Jesus was going. That was the reason why he came into this world.

If you ask me today: “Dieter, what is your primary expectation with regard to God?”, I will answer: “It is salvation. My primary expectation is that God wipes me clean of all my sins and tells me ‘Enter the glory of God - on Calvary Christ died for you.’”

Everything else is secondary to this. Of course, I share all aspects of my life with God. I ask for healing. I share my daily problems. I pray for my government.

But all those things are secondary. Sometimes God heals, sometimes he doesn’t. Sometimes he forces a change in government. Sometimes, however, we have corrupt governments for decades. But God always has a reason why he does something.

But the “promises” God makes, he always keeps to the letter. The apostle Paul writes: ***“I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ... will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord”*** (8:38-39). And because of that, he can even rejoice in tribulations.

The problem is when our secondary expectations become primary. “We” rejoice in a God who has conquered sin and death. And that reality never changes. ***And that is why I can sing: “Hosanna. Hosanna. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord”***. And I sing it every day, whether I am experiencing a personal high or a low.

Yes, the King of Israel entered Jerusalem. But he came to give his life as a ransom for many. And in giving his life, he gave us far more than we ever expected and more than what we sometimes wish for. Amen.