Fear Not! Behold Your King
John 12:12-19

Have you ever told a story - or recounted something - but you've subtly changed it? And maybe you tell one version to one group of people, like your colleagues at work, but when you get home or with your friends, you tell a different version. Or, maybe you add things that didn't happen, or leave things out that did.

Why do we do that? Well, we might be tailoring the story to the audience, or make it more funny, or to make ourselves look good, or someone else bad. Whatever the reason, there's always a reason for the changes you make.

And this morning we're looking at John's account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. And as he tells it, he quotes from the prophet Zechariah, to interpret what's going on in the light of those words. But does he? Look at v14-15: 'And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written, "Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold your king is coming, sitting on a donkey's colt."'

And the second part of that *is* a paraphrase of what Zechariah wrote 500 years before - Zechariah 9:9, 'Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'

So far, so good. Except John has changed the beginning of the quote. In the original, Zechariah writes, '*Rejoice greatly*, O daughter of Zion!… Behold your king is coming to you' (Zech 9:9). But here, John has changed it, and in place of 'Rejoice greatly' he says, "Fear not."

Why make that change? Now, you might say, 'is he just quoting the Septuagint?', the Greek translation of the Old Testament which the authors of the New Testament frequently quote and which has these subtle differences from the original Hebrew. And the answer's, no. The Septuagint also reads, Rejoice greatly your king is coming.

So is he, as some commentators, like Don Carson, suggest, mashing two quotes together; taking a part of another prophecy, for example Isaiah 40, which says to the person who brings good news to Zion, 'Fear not' and creating a compound quotation. Maybe.

Or maybe he's just putting a different spin on the original. You see, what is one of *the* major reasons why someone's life - maybe your own - is not marked with joy? Why we're not rejoicing? And you might answer, suffering, disappointment, discouragement, betrayal, comparisons. But at some point someone's going to say, *fear.* Because joy has a hard time co-habiting, living in the same heart, as fear and anxiety, doesn't it. If Teddy Roosevelt said that 'comparison is the thief of joy', fear is a fellow robber.

So like a key change in a song, to say 'Fear not!' is just another way of saying 'Rejoice greatly', but in a key that speaks to our fears.

Ok, but however he's done it, John has done it deliberately. And he wants us that in Jesus entering Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, there is something with the power to take away your fears, to deal with your anxieties, and to clear the ground for overflowing joy in your heart: 'Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold your king is coming.'

So we're going to look at three things: what do we fear? How do we respond to our fears? And What's the answer to our fears?

What Do We Fear?
Look at v12, ‘The next day…’ that’s the day after Mary anointing Jesus with that incredibly valuable ointment, ‘… the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem.’ And it’s Passover time, and tens, probably hundreds of thousands of pilgrims have begun descending on Jerusalem to celebrate the feast. And many would have been Galileans who already knew about Jesus, and thousands of others would have heard of him.

And back in chapter 11, John told us, ‘They were looking for Jesus’ - would he come to the feast? And now, John tells us, they get word that he *is* coming, coming into Jerusalem, and so they line the streets to welcome him.

It’s heady stuff, isn't it. But what’s it got to do with fear? Because as this crowd, v13, ‘took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord”’ surely, what Zechariah *originally* wrote seems more fitting, doesn't it? ‘Rejoice greatly! Join the party! Your king is coming!’

Because when they cry out, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord’, they’re quoting Psalm 118, a psalm that by this time the Rabbis were teaching referred to the Messiah - *the* Blessed One, *the* One who comes in the name of the Lord.

And here is the crowd hailing Christ as king, welcoming him as messiah. So… rejoice! Why would anyone be afraid?

Well, for the last two weeks we’ve seen the fear of the religious leaders in the face of Jesus, and we see it again here. Verse 19, ‘So the Pharisees said to one another, “You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him.”

So, they’re afraid that events are spinning out of their control, aren't they. They’re afraid of what the Romans might do if this crowd starts proclaiming Jesus as king, when everyone knows Caesar’s king. They fear for the future - *their* future.

But of course, you didn't need to be a Pharisee to feel like that. What if you were just a quiet, cautious kind of soul, living in Jerusalem, watching what’s going on. And you’re seeing the excitability of the crowd, and the nervousness of the Roman garrison. Wouldn’t you be forgiven for thinking ‘nothing good is going to come of this’. As your background anxiety level goes from a 3 to a 6.

But are our fears any different? You see, at root, when we feel anxious, or worried, and our thoughts and minds are churning, or fearful, and unable to sleep at night, isn’t it often because we also feel out of control? And we don’t know how to bring things back into order?

And you can be afraid for the future, for your job, or financial security. Or for the future of a loved one, for their health or the choices they’re making, and you feel powerless to do anything about it. Or maybe, like that person looking out of their window in Jerusalem, nervously eyeing the Romans, you’re looking at the world stage and eying those who have replaced them. The empires of our day. And like them you fear.

Or maybe you don't. Maybe you're full of bravado and for you, the only thing to fear is fear itself. But is that true? Or do you live a guarded life. And you don't let anyone too close, because we all want people to think well of us, so we control what they see. And we don't want to appear weak or needy or less good than we want to look. We're afraid of what people might think. Or maybe you're just afraid of ceding control to others. And you fear being tied down, or being told what to do.

And the apostle Paul could have been a man of bravado. A man who said he feared nothing but fear. A man brim full of confidence - a graduate of *the* Ivy League seminary of his day; a man with quite possibly the greatest intellect of the day. A man with indefatigable energy and sense of purpose, and a proven track record of achievement. If any man could have toughed out the fear thing, Paul could.

But he doesn't. And in 2 Corinthians 7:5 he says, 'our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn - fighting without *and fear within*.'

You see Paul was honest. He was not afraid of admitting his fears.

Because we all fear. Fear of being shown up or let down. Fear of missing out or being passed by. Fear of someone seeing the real us. Fearful of being thought of as fearful. And over it all, Paul says, is the fear of death, which keeps people in bondage he says. Why? Because death is the ultimate loss of control. And what lies beyond death? If you're an atheist, nothing - which makes this life a fearful, meaningless nothing, but if you do believe in God, there's judgement. And will you pass it? Have you done enough? Have you been good enough, zealous enough, prayed enough?

You see a fear of judgment is the ultimate fear for the future, the ultimate fear of exposure and being found out. And our feelings of guilt tell us we fear it.

So what do we do with fear?

How Do We Respond to Fear?
Look first at the Pharisees. Verse 19 again: 'So the Pharisees said to one another, "You see see that you are gaining nothing." They see the crowd going after Jesus. They see the risks. They see their efforts at controlling him or his influence are not working, and they're afraid, and what do they do? They turn on one another. They attack one another. And the blame game begins: *you*, you lot, what *you* suggested, what *you* told us to do, the plans *you* came up with, look at them, they're useless, you're gaining nothing! And they're talking to their own.

Now consider our own hearts. Isn't that exactly what fear can make us do? And maybe you're afraid of what might happen if you don't get your way. Or of things not going the way you want. And you too feel threatened. And find yourself lashing out at those around you.

But also, the implication of what they're saying is, 'it's not working, we need a different strategy. We need to redouble our efforts.' And just like them, fear can drive us back on ourselves, back on our own self-reliance. Back on our efforts to try harder and control things or fix things.

Now, you might say, 'that might be a problem for you, Martin, but it's just as likely to make me reach out for help. If I'm anxious or fearful about something, if I feel out of my depth, I'm willing to pull others in.' And let's be clear, seeking help from wise sources, and getting good advice, are all good. Read the Book of Proverbs and it's only the fool who goes it alone.

But, ultimately, if that advice or help pushes you back on yourself, or to trust in your inner you, it will never answer your fear, because - ultimately - you and I simply do not have the power to control our lives. And to think we do is to think we are God.

Instead, look how Paul responds to fear: 'We were so utterly burdened beyond our strength *that we despaired*… Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. *But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God* who raises the dead' (2 Cor 1:8-9). Think you've got to be God in the face of fear, and you'll die a thousand deaths. But let your fear turn you to God, Paul says, and you'll know a power at work that brings life from death.

So look again at John's quotation from Zechariah 9, and this time think of Frank Sinatra or Taylor Swift. Because - at least for some of you - if I sang with Sinatra, 'And now, the end is near, And so I face the final curtain. My friend, I'll say it clear, I'll state my case, of which I'm certain.' You'll know it's building to the punch line - 'I did it my way'. Or if I sang with Taylor Swift, who I'm told is a pop star, 'I can read your mind, "She's having the time of her life", There in her glittering prime…' you'd know it was building to 'I can do it with a broken heart.'

And when the authors of the New Testament quote a passage from the prophets, they also don't quote the whole passage - but they also want you to carry on the song. That if a Swiftie knows their lines, you'll know the text. You'll read what they write and know what comes next.

So, look what Zechariah says, 'Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey…. [AND, what follows?]…I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, *and he shall speak peace to the nations; his rule shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth*.' (Zech 9:9-10).

So this king who Zechariah sees coming, is not just the king of Israel, great though that would be. He's the king whose kingdom will stretch to the ends of the earth. In other words, he's your king. The king in ultimate sovereign control. The One, and only one, who does have control over your life. And fear will either drive you into the arms of your own self-reliance, which will never give you peace - or into his arms, and his certain promise of peace.

What's the Answer to Fear?
Look again at v14-15, 'And Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written, "Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold your king is coming."

But look how he comes: "sitting on a donkey's colt!" (v15).

Don't you think that's counterintuitive? The crowd are wanting, wishing for Jesus to take his place as king. After all, look what they've got in their hands. Palm branches. And 100 years before, when Simon Maccabeus led his forces to victory, and drove the occupying Syrian forces out of Jerusalem, the citizens of Jerusalem celebrated his victory with music… and palm branches. And years after this event, in the Jewish wars of independence against Rome, coins were minted bearing what symbol? The palm branch.

So Jesus isn't just being greeted with a national but a *nationalistic* symbol. He's being greeted as the deliverer, the victor, the king who has come to lead the uprising and overthrow the enemy.

And John is saying, 'Fear not! He's not that kind of king. Look at him, he's coming on a donkey's colt, not a warhorse. He's not come to lead an insurrection. He's come, Zechariah says, '*humble*... [and to] speak peace to the nations.' (Zech 9:9-10).

Well, sure, John, but Zechariah does also say, 'I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the warhorse from Jerusalem, and the battle bow shall be cut off' (v10). And that sure sounds a lot like military victory. And how's he going to do that from the back of a donkey? How's this king, coming in humility, going to defeat *any* enemy, and be the answer to any of our fears?

Well, look what John writes immediately after he quotes Zechariah: v16, 'His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, *then they remembered* that these things had been written about him and had been done to him.'

And you would be justified to scratch your head and go 'surely the whole point here is that everyone *does* get what's going on. I mean the crowd get it. They're crying out, v13 again, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, *even the King of Israel*!" And the Pharisees get it. And Jesus himself obviously gets it - because he's deliberately acting out the prophecy. What do you mean the disciples didn't get it?'

It's that John and the others did not understand that it was precisely by Jesus coming humbly that he defeats his, and their, and our enemies, and sets us free from fear.

You see John says they did not understand until 'Jesus was *glorified.'* And in John's gospel, the moment of Jesus being glorified is his death and resurrection. And when John uses the word glorified here, it's the same word used by the Septuagint to translate Isaiah 52:13, the opening verse of that passage that describes the suffering of the Messiah, in our place, for our sins, 'Behold my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, *and shall be exalted*' - glorified in his lifting up, glorified in his crucifixion.

You see, how does Zechariah say this coming king will crush his people's enemies? Zechariah 9:11, through 'the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free.'

And John is saying, it was only after we saw that happen, it was only after we saw him ride in humility into Jerusalem, and lay down his life, and shed his blood, and rise in triumph from the dead, that it all fell into place. That we realised, 'he's done it!' He has crushed our enemies and he brought us peace.

Because it's then that we realised, he's not just the king of Israel. He's the king of endless glory and endless years, and yet he humbled himself for us. And if a merely human king had done that, it would have been something, but for *this* king to do that? And not just humbled to a donkey, but to the cross. Because when he did, he was taking our place.

And that's why John says, "*Fear not*, daughter of Zion." Because it's in your king coming humbly that your proud enemies are brought low. It's in him dying for you that death dies. It's in him being condemned in your place, that you are counted righteous. It's in him being cast off that you are

brought in. It's in him being abandoned that you can know you are loved and will never be abandoned. And it's in his seeming defeat at the hands of the powers of darkness that the grip of those hands is broken and you are set free.

Fear not, John says, your king is coming. Coming to the aid of his people, coming to rescue from the domain of darkness, coming to establish his kingdom. So you don't need to fear not being in control. You never were in control. But He is and ever will be. And you don't need to fear the future, because he has engraved your name on the palms of his hands, and those nail prints tell you, he will never forget you.

And you don't need to fear being known. There is nothing in your past or your present that the blood of Christ does not cleanse. And there is no security as strong as knowing you are loved and accepted by him.

And you don't need to be fearful of the world scene. Your king has come and will come. Your king has triumphed and will triumph. And our current leaders are but mists, the Bible says, and they will soon be gone. But Christ reigns forever. So don't fear them, fear the one who holds them and you in his hand.

But in closing, listen to how John Newton, the English pastor, former slave trader and writer of *Amazing Grace* put it in a letter to a friend: 'To view him [Jesus] by faith, as living, dying, reigning, interceding, and governing for us, [in other words, to view Christ as king] will furnish us with such views, prospects, motives, and encouragement, as will enable us to endure any cross, to overcome all opposition, to withstand temptation, and to run in the way of his commandments with an enlarged heart.'

And we all want an enlarged heart - a heart that in Zechariah's words, 'rejoices greatly.' A heart overflowing with joy and full of happiness, Well, John Newton says, look to Christ your king. Behold him. Your sin has been paid for, satan has been conquered; death has been defeated; your future is secure; and you are loved and Christ your king reigns. So… fear not, and rejoice greatly.