

## The King's (Palm Sunday) Speech

TEXT: John 12:12-26

Speaker: Sinclair B. Ferguson

### PRAYER:

[00:00:00] Our gracious God and Father as we acknowledge your worthiness and praise you together. We thank you for your presence and for the power of your Holy Spirit and for the promises of our Lord Jesus that He will be with us when we thus gather that He will speak to us from his word in the power of his spirit. And as we come to you with our varied needs, our joys and our sorrows, our well known past, and our unknown future, we pray that by your spirit and through your word, our eyes may be directed to our Lord Jesus. Our hearts may be engaged with affection and trust for Him. Our wills may be transformed and bow before him and our lives made ready to serve him. And so we pray, Lord Christ, that you will move among us in this room today that each may find in you the all sufficiency of your grace, and none may be turned empty or hungry or thirsty away. So speak to us. We ask for your great name's sake. And for our blessing, we ask it. Amen. Please be seated.

### SCRIPTURE READING:

[00:01:34] Our scripture reading this morning from the Gospel, according to John chapter 12. And we begin to read there at verse 12. We're going to continue reading in that passage through verse 33, and you'll find it in the Pew Bible on page 899, which is a copy of the English standard version, which is the translation that we use in our services and for children who have their children's Bible. The passage is on page 1329, one 3 to 9 for our children, John, Chapter 12 and beginning to read at verse 12. Let us hear God's Word. "The next day, the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they 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, even the King of Israel. 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. 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. The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to bear witness. The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they had heard he had done this sign. So the Pharisees said to one another, You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the world has gone after him. Now, among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, Sir, we wish to see Jesus. Philip went and told Andrew. Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. And Jesus answered them. The hour has come for the son of man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it. And whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me. And where I am there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the father will honor him. Now, is my soul troubled? And what shall I say, Father? Save me from this hour. But for this purpose, I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name. Then a voice came from heaven. I have glorified it and I will glorify it again. The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said an angel has spoken to

him. Jesus answered, This voice has come for your sake, not mine. Now is the judgment of this world. Now, will the ruler of this world be cast out? And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself. He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die."

### SERMON:

[00:05:39] When our Lord Jesus rode into Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday, there was already a plot against his life and there was a price on his head. At the end of Chapter 11, we are told these details, Chapter 11, verse 53. From that day on, the Jews made plans to put him to death. And in Chapter 11 and verse 57, the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where Jesus was, he should let them know so that they might arrest him. So we do need to understand fundamentally as we approach such a well known passage as this. How many Palm Sunday sermons have you heard? You have been there and you know that. And it's all very familiar. But we need to grasp that Jesus rides into Jerusalem as somebody who is regarded as a criminal. There is a price on his head. And not only is there a plan to murder him, but John tells us there's also a plan to murder Lazarus, whom he has raised from the dead. Those are the circumstances in which Jesus rides into Jerusalem. And one of the fascinating things about John's account is the way in which he gives us some detail about this famous palm branch waving crowd. We tend to think of them as a kind of anomalous crowd. But John makes it clear, actually, this was a concourse of three quite different crowds. There was the crowd that was coming up to Jerusalem for the great Passover feast. Estimates vary enormously as to how many people crowded into Jerusalem at Passover time.

[00:07:58] They have ranged in history from over 2 million to what I think is probably a better estimate, perhaps of a couple of hundred thousand. But this city of Jerusalem, by modern standards, was a very small village, really, a little town. And so it was thronged with people who were coming, some of them, as this passage tells us, from the furthest parts of the known world and multitudes as we know, as Jesus himself did when he was 12 years old, from the various towns and villages throughout the land. And so there was that crowd and then there was the crowd that was coming immediately from Bethany, who were excited and agog because Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead. And actually, John notes, they were still talking about it to these other strangers who were coming up for the pilgrimage. But it's fascinating that this Palm branch waving moment in John's mind is actually excited by a third part of the crowd. That is not those who were slowly making their way to Jerusalem or those who had come up for the day from Bethany, but those who had arrived early in Jerusalem to prepare for the feast. Who knew, because presumably it was a poorly hidden secret that there was a plot against Jesus life, who knew that if Jesus came to Jerusalem, they were in for action of the strongest kind! What would happen to him? And so if we put the best possible complexion on it, perhaps, as John says, they came out of Jerusalem already having palm branches in their hands when they heard that Jesus was on the way. And they waved their palm branches and they shouted Hosanna to the one who comes in the name of the Lord who is the king of Israel? And it's this that becomes the catalyst of the events that follow.

[00:10:38] It's this in John's account of Palm Sunday that encourages Jesus to send a very definite signal in the way in which he arrives in Jerusalem. Reading this passage this week, I've smiled to myself at the thought -- reading these words, you would almost think that the Apostle

John knew that we would be sitting in our pews in 2012 thinking about Palm Sunday and the palm waving. And we've been there and we've seen that there's absolutely nothing new to learn. So he does something that artistically, apart from anything else, artistically, is very clever. If you can imagine him as the, as the producer of his narrative of Jesus. He has his cameraman focus in three different ways on this scene so that we can see the the depth and the riches of what is actually going on here. Because this for John, as for Jesus, is a hugely significant moment. When we read the other three gospels, we usually say that the turning point, the hinge in those gospels is when Simon Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ and Jesus begins to teach them about the cross and sets his face to go to Jerusalem.

[00:12:21] But in John's gospel, this is the hinge moment. And in a few minutes, we'll see exactly why that is the case. His camera is, first of all, on these crowds, and he makes it, I think, fairly clear that they saw this as a time of great nationalistic fervor. What are palm branches? Well, a palm branch, is a palm branch, is a palm branch, is a palm branch. But not to these people. You notice that John tells us as the people who were in Jerusalem who very carefully and deliberately got palm branches, came out of the city to join this crowd. Palm branches in this culture. And actually, historically, among these particular people and historically in Jerusalem, palm branches were national flags. If you want to catch the atmosphere here, it's some great national occasion. And the children and their parents standing in the streets as they watch the cavalcade come through the streets and waving the stars and stripes and being caught up in the excitement and the enthusiasm. Would it be too daring to say that this would be like massive numbers of people standing on the streets of Columbia, South Carolina, waving Confederate flags? That would be a symbol of something, wouldn't it? And that's exactly why John tells this story in such detail. And why it is that he includes words that are essentially treasonable words. That you would never say in public if you were a Jew. Here comes the king. Within a few verses essentially, or in John's gospel, a few chapters. Jesus is being tried for treason. Because it was rumored he was the king of Israel. That's what Pontius Pilate's examination seeks to discover. Are you claiming to be the king? And so this is another little indication to us, isn't it, that this is a, this is a moment of great nationalistic fervor. Because few, if any of these people would have dared to go out as a single individual and waved their palm branch and said, This is the King of Israel. Knowing that the nearest Roman soldier would immediately have an arm round their neck and drag them away. If one puts the best complexion on it, this was the strongest defense against his murder that Jesus could have had. And at least for a matter of days the gospel writers tell us it, as it were, gave Jesus a little space because the Jewish leaders would not arrest him for fear of what the people might do. But it was a moment of enormous national fervor.

[00:16:08] A number of you who have political interests, which is not a few of you have asked me in recent days. So what about this Scottish referendum in 2014? You know, there's going to be a referendum in Scotland in the year 2014, and the people are going to decide whether they want to be an independent nation or not, free from the British government, free from England in particular, wanting to keep associations with the Welsh. At least one would hope, at least I would hope in my particular circumstances. You imagine the day after that referendum if the Scottish people vote for independence, it won't be the day after, it will be the moment the vote is announced. If they vote for independence, those great Scottish flags, those yellow lion rampant and those marvelous blue and white saltires, they'll be in the streets and everybody will be out or some of them will be out. The majority may be waving them and waving them and it's glorious!

At last, after all these years, freedom! But if you're a television interviewer with your little microphone going around and saying, "What's this going to mean? What's this all about?" The answer is going to be have I really no idea. But it's marvelous. It's glorious. We feel so Scottish. We're going to be liberated. What on earth possessed them to think that this gracious Jesus had come to liberate them from Rome? And you see, if if you had asked them, what are these words you are speaking? I think many of them would have been bound to say, "Well, everybody else is seeing them." They're marvelous words and and we get caught up in it and we have these aspirations and and these hopes.

[00:18:18] It's actually a rather startling illustration of a very obvious spiritual point, isn't it? That when we stand in church on Sunday morning and thunder out the Apostle's Creed with such enthusiasm. Well, this is the safest place in Colombia to do that. But what about a discouraging Tuesday morning when you're surrounded by people who don't really share your faith or trust in Christ? How real are the words? Then. How easily do you stand for Jesus then? Or is my Christian faith simply another way of being American? As this was simply another way of being Jewish in those circumstances. And so you see what John is helping us to understand was that for the crowd, this was really no more than a moment of nationalistic fervor. And not a moment of real understanding of the gospel.

[00:19:34] But then his camera moves to the disciples, doesn't it? You'll see this in verses 15 and 16. As John cites these words from Zechariah chapter nine. And then he tells us in this, this kind of moment, when he he he tells us something about the, the disciple band. He says his disciples didn't understand these things at first, but when Jesus was glorified, that is after Jesus had died on the cross and been raised from the dead and was in the presence of His Heavenly Father, when Jesus was glorified then they remembered that these things had been written about Him and had been done to him. I think that's really interesting, don't you? He doesn't say, "You remember the two who went on the road to Emmaus and Jesus accompanied them and taught them about himself, in the Old Testament Scriptures. He doesn't say, "That's how we found this out". Interestingly, he doesn't even say, "Do you remember those days between Jesus resurrection and his ascension, those six weeks when he kept coming back to the disciples and teaching them about the kingdom?" He doesn't say, "Jesus, Jesus taught us this after his resurrection." What he says, you notice is, that at the time they didn't understand these things but when Jesus was glorified, they remembered these things. They had what the psychologists call an aha moment. I remember learning about that when I was 17. I was a first year university student and one of my psychology textbooks written by two American professors called Krech and Crutchfield, page 300 and something, had this little box with the heading, "The Aha Experience. You know, I had lived a very sheltered life. I thought, Kretch and Crutchfield, there goes another Americanism. But you know what that is, don't you? It's the eureka moment. When apparently without actually sitting down and as it were, thinking with clinical logic to a conclusion, something dawns on you and you see things in a new light or the puzzle is solved. Can be as simple as where on earth are those car keys? And then just suddenly it comes into your mind. There's this moment of illumination. And you remember where they are, or the cell phone. And that's what John is speaking about here. But in some contexts that he doesn't describe... You know, they didn't have Bibles. You understand that none of these disciples had a Bible of their own. It's inconceivable a single one of these disciples could have afforded a Bible. So they either had it memorized or at best, they had bits and pieces that they could see in the synagogue, and perhaps it was as they

were sitting around and one of them who had memorized Zechariah, which is the second last book of the Old Testament. So he had gone pretty far in Bible memorization, was reciting the prophecy of Zechariah chapter nine, from which these words are cited in verse 15. And if you want to see them for yourself and you have a pew Bible there on page 797, and if you don't have a pew Bible, you go to the division between the old and the New Testament, turn left two books and you've got Zechariah. And here are the words. "Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion, shout aloud or daughter of Jerusalem. Your king is coming. He's humble. He's mounted on a donkey". And then he goes on to say this. "His rule shall be from sea to sea and from the river to the ends of the earth. And as for you, also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit and the result will be, verse 13, I have bent Judah as my bow. I've made Ephraim its arrow. I will stir up your sons Oh Zion against your sons Oh Greece and wield you like a warrior sword". And as they're hearing these words, one says to another, that's the meaning of what happened on Palm Sunday. He was fulfilling these Old Testament prophecies. Now we see, because after all, he's sent us into the whole world with the gospel message. Now we see that he was riding into Jerusalem in such a way that we would learn from the prophecy of Zachariah. He's coming to be the king of the nations. And lest he be misunderstood, he's coming in meekness and lowliness. And he is coming to bring in a new covenant by the shedding of his blood. And you notice that, don't you? All of this in Zechariah's prophecy that the people had no understanding of, and even the disciples, they they didn't grasp what he was coming to do. And then later on, the Holy Spirit opened their eyes and it dawned on them. "Ahh, That's who Jesus is". This is an enormously insightful statement, I think. Don't you? It's about discovering who Jesus really is.

[00:26:05] Someone was telling me just the other day, not in our own congregation, but somebody I know well was telling me how in the. in the course of going through Christianity explored, which we often use here in the church as well, a total stranger to Christ came to him and said, "I think I'm beginning to see". Going through the Gospel of Mark. "I think I'm beginning to see that he came because of my need. That he is the Son of God sent by his father in order to take my sin. The son of man came to give his life as a ransom for many. And I see that he's not just a character in this book. That he's real. He's alive. He's as real as real can be. And I can come to know him and trust him. And it's not just locked up in the Apostles Creed. But it's Jesus himself and this is who He is". And this ancient prophecy, I suppose many of the disciples had been forced in synagogue school to learn Zechariah off by heart. That was what synagogue school was all about. Learning the Bible off by heart. And now it dawns on them that these are not distant words that have no relevance to their lives. But this is Jesus. And he has every conceivable relevance to their lives. Well, that raises a question, doesn't it? Um. Where are you? In the disciple trajectory? I mean, you probably wouldn't be here unless you were somewhere in a disciple trajectory. It could be that you're here just because you've got some respect for somebody who's a Christian or you're here because you'll not get your Sunday lunch from your folks unless you're here. But as ever dawned on you, who Jesus really is? Is he as real, as real, as real could be? That's what they were discovering. They were beginning to to piece all the bits of the Bible together and see how they helped to explain the Lord Jesus to them and it was this aha moment. Well, that's who he is. That's what he was doing. He was fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah. And it's interesting, isn't it, that, Zachariah's prophecy specifically mentions the Greeks. Just in parentheses, the Greeks are not frequently mentioned in the Bible. And don't you think it's at least striking that Philip and Andrew come to Jesus and say to Jesus, "Jesus, there are

some Greeks here. And they want to see you". Because the Greeks have, have said these words... These these words are actually hidden in many Scottish pulpits. Congregation never sees them, but they are hidden here where nobody else can see their words directed to the preacher, "Sirs, we would see Jesus". But they are wanting to do that right here, right now. And they're Greeks. And they come and say to Jesus, "Jesus, there are these Greeks here".

[00:30:04] And that brings us to the third camera angle. Because Jesus seems to have seen this as a signal from his father. The crowds, by and large see it as a moment of nationalistic fervor. The disciple band understand it only somewhat later. But Jesus understands it fully because this to him is a signal from the Father. And as I say, this is the dividing moment in the Gospel of John, because up until this time in the Gospel of John, there's a little expression that has punctuated the story. And the expression is, "his time had not yet come". Or, "his hour had not yet come". But do you see what Jesus says in verse 23 when he's told that the Greeks have arrived? Jesus answered them, "the hour has come". So what is this hour? Well, he tells us that it's. It's the hour of his glory. The time has come, he says, "for the son of man", that's his favorite way of describing himself... "The hour has come for the son of man to be glorified". He's going to be lifted up, he says later on in verse 32, "When I am lifted up from the earth". Now, that's a that's a double entendre, isn't it? That's a statement. That's got two meanings wrapped up in the same statement. He's going to be lifted up on the cross, to die. But that's the way he's going to be exalted as the Savior of men and women among the nations. So this hour of his glory is also going to be the hour of his agony. And he describes that in verse 27. "Now, is my soul troubled?" Now, Jesus only infrequently speaks about what is going on in his emotional life. And this is one of them. "My soul is distressed", he says. This is not some ancient Greek hero going to his death as macho man. This is Jesus going to his glory, realizing how costly it is going to be for him to be lifted up so that he may draw men and women and boys and girls to the forgiveness of their sins and to grace and mercy. And he knows this is the hour when Gethsemane is near, when the shadow of Calvary falls fully upon his soul, when the moment when he will cry out with that awful sense of God-forsakenness. Is about to come. And so the hour of great glory is also an hour of intense agony. But I think it's important that we also notice that Jesus describes it in verse 31 and 32 as the hour of spiritual victory. I suppose, if I were to say to you, "Why did Jesus die?" I think for all of us, our instinctive answer with respect to the blessings of the Christian gospel would be he died, that we might be forgiven. But you notice this passage says nothing about Jesus dying for our forgiveness. That's true. But it's not the point that Jesus is making here. It doesn't say here, I'm going to be lifted up from the earth in order that I may be the source of the forgiveness of sins. True, though, that is. Here, he concentrates on something else.

[00:34:46] He says, When I am lifted up, what will happen, is that the judgment of this world will take place and the ruler of this world will be cast out. Now what's he saying? He is saying my sins, your sins are not your only problem. Your sins are only a symptom of a problem. A horrific symptom of a problem. And that is that by nature we are not only sinners, but by nature we are in bondage to the one John here describes as the ruler of this world. No matter how respectable life looks. No matter what position I may have. What Jesus teaches us and the apostles teach us, over and over again, is that my problem is not only that I'm guilty of sin, that I'm dead in trespasses and sins, but as Paul says in Ephesians two, that my life is in the grip of the evil one. You actually can't remove that from the Gospels or from the New Testament teaching and have very much of a gospel left. And that's what Jesus focuses on. And actually

there are all kinds of indications of it. I find the simplest and the clearest indication of it is that people will say to me, you know, "When the time comes, I'll, I'll entrust my life to Jesus and I'll be able to do that". And I say, "Well, reassure me because I care about you. Do it now." And of course they can't. Because they're in bondage. Actually, I think I find that people are quite content to recognize that yes, of course they sin. But the one thing very few of us are prepared to acknowledge is that we are slaves --to an alien power. And that we're not free. That we're not free to love God. We're not free to serve God. You meet a non-Christian who says he is free. You, you say, Well, show me. Show me how absolutely free you are by loving and worshiping the Lord Jesus and following him with all your life. And whatever excuses they give, the real reason is because they are in bondage to the ruler of this world. That's what he's saying. And as those of you who have read C.S Lewis famous little book, *The Screwtape Letters* know well that among his strategies are to make people think of himself as a foolish creature strangely dressed, or to ignore him altogether. You know, when we do those things with people, it's usually because we feel very insecure and frightened. Isn't it? When you mock somebody that tells you usually far more about yourself than about them. Or when you pretend they don't exist. And this is what Jesus is saying. This is why he is riding to the cross, because on the cross, where, thank God he will die for my sins, he is going to do something else. He is going to wrest from the hands of the evil one, all the dominion and power that he has over men and women in order that through his death and resurrection, our Lord Jesus Christ will set us free.

[00:39:06] One of the things the evil one uses, Paul tells us in Colossians two is, is our guilt. He uses our guilt. He trades in guilt edged stock, if I may put it that way. And you see, he blackmails us. Isn't this true? You imagine the hidden sins there are in this room? But if, for example, somehow or another, when you came into this room, your and my hidden sins would all be enumerated on a huge screen at the back of the church. How many of us would be able to stay during the whole of the service as those sins flashed up before people? And you see when that's true of us, and it is true of us. Please God, we are not so foolish as to pretend it isn't true of us. Please God, you won't run away from this reality about yourself. That if God were to mark your sins as Psalm 130 says, none of us could stand. None of us could continue to live in Colombia if other people knew what had gone through our minds. And so Satan comes along and he does his little deals with us, doesn't he? Just let's try and keep these things polite, under control. Nobody else need know. We'll all accept them. And you play into his hands and he's got you. Exactly where he wants you.

[00:40:54] But Jesus comes, and he bears all my guilt. And by bearing my guilt and my fear of judgment and my fear of death, he snaps the chains by which the evil one has bound me to himself. And so I can say when Satan tempts me to despair and tells me of the wrong within, upward, I look and see Christ there who made an end of all my sin because my sinless Savior died. My guilty soul is counted free. And God, the just is satisfied to look on Christ and pardon me. Or, in older words, when Satan comes and accuses me of sin and guilt, I'm able to say to him, but Christ has died for my sins to set me free from your - grip. And to draw me to himself. And then Jesus says a very interesting thing. It may seem difficult to follow Jesus logic here, but when he speaks about his death, he then goes on to speak about our death. Not our physical death, but another kind of death. Verse 25, Whoever loves his life loses it. But whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. What does he mean? He means this. That if you're not trusting fully and joyfully in Jesus Christ, there's something else in your hands. It's as though

he's saying to me, What's in your hands? What so fills your hands that there's no room in your hands for me. And it will differ from one to another. It may be something. It may be yourself. It may be another person. It may be a possession. It may be your ambition. It may be power. It may be money. It may be influence. It may be your profession or your job. It could even be your family. And the Lord Jesus says, "Now, those of you who are parents done this with your children, Let me prised open that clenched fist that keeps you from entrusting everything to me and let whatever it is fall into my hand for safe keeping". And you place your hand in my nail pierced hand. And come and love and trust me.

[00:44:08] My dear friends, for some of us, there is an almost excruciating pain in coming to trust in Jesus Christ. Because so much else has been glued to our hearts. In which we find our security and hope for our salvation. And only when it drops into the hands of the Lord Jesus. Is your family the great idol in your life? My dear friend, you're not big enough to secure your family. Let them drop into the hands of Christ. Is it your position or your influence or somebody you love? You're driving ambition. You're not able to secure it and you become a prisoner to it.

[00:45:05] But once your hand has been prised open by grace and let has dropped into the hand the safe hand of Jesus Christ, and you're holding to him. Then at last, you'll be free to enjoy the gifts he's given you. Without that gnawing insecurity that you also feel. And all because in his grace, he rode into Jerusalem that day, as king. Just as one day, as John also sees in the Book of Revelation, he will see a great multitude that no one can number from every nation, all tribes and peoples and languages standing before the throne and before the lamb clothed in white robes with palm branches in their hands.

[00:46:05] Dear ones. As I look out on the congregation today, I see some of you for whom the ones you have loved most dearly in this world are already there, clothed in white and waving their palm branches. And you want with all your heart to be where they are. Because the Lord Jesus opened your hands and now he has filled you with himself. Oh, may our hearts say in this sense. Ride on. Ride on Jesus in Majesty.

#### PRAYER:

[00:46:44] Heavenly Father, for the wonder of this Palm Sunday and the glory of the Gospel, we give you our praise and thanks and seek by your spirit to release all we have, all we are, all we trust into the safe hands of the Savior and deliverer, Jesus Christ. We ask it for his sake. Amen.