

## The Innocence Project

John 12:12-20, Matthew 21:1-11, Mark 11:1-11, Luke 19:28-44

### **Slide 1**

In 1992, attorneys Peter Neufeld and Barry Scheck founded an organization called the Innocence Project.

Using DNA and other scientific advancements to prove wrongful conviction, it has been at the forefront of criminal justice reform.

The mission of the Innocence project is to free the innocent, prevent wrongful convictions, and create fair, compassionate, and equitable systems of justice for everyone.

Today is Palm Sunday, a day where we usually look at the celebration and victory celebrated as Jesus rode into Jerusalem. This morning, we're going to look at the darker side of Palm Sunday.

You see, the stage was set for Easter long before the celebration of this triumphant entry.

If you've ever seen the 1973 movie *Jesus Christ Super Star*, then you know that, in spite of its weirdness, it captures not only the excitement of the crowd, but the animosity of the religious leaders and the torment of Judas.

While some might question the orthodoxy of Andrew Lloyd Weber's view of the events leading up to Holy Week, I would argue that the movie truly captures the emotions of that event as recorded in John's account.

What occurred, both leading up to and the events that happened on the actual day when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the donkey, set the stage for what would transpire less than a week later.

It seemed that everything in Jesus' ministry led up to this point; a turning point for many. This was a veritable "*Come to Jesus moment.*"

So how could the celebration that ensued on "Palm Sunday" lead to the horrors that would happen five days later?

Our theme for this Easter is the "innocence" of Jesus. We're focusing on the fact that what happened on Good Friday was a travesty of justice.

We don't have to look very deep into the story to discover that Jesus was set up and framed by the authorities. Palm Sunday was where and when the stage was set.

According to the Innocence Project, the leading causes of innocent people being falsely charged and convicted are:

- Eyewitness Misidentification
- Misapplication of Forensic Science
- False Confessions
- Official Misconduct
- Coerced Pleas

The University of Colorado Law School states, "*Official misconduct by police officers, prosecutors, or other government officials has been present in 54% of wrongful convictions across the nation.*" Think about it, 54%

Normally, when we think of Palm Sunday, we think of the celebration and excitement of the day.

This morning, I want to look at the darker side of Palm Sunday, because it was here that we see the seeds of official misconduct, which ended in the conviction and crucifixion of Jesus.

## Slide 2

Yet, what we really need to understand is that, for Jesus, this was something that was planned.

This wasn't something that just happened, where the stars aligned and Jesus just happened to be in the right place at just the right time. This was how it was supposed to go down.

John's account of what happened on Palm Sunday is typical of John's Gospel. He sees the big picture but doesn't delve into the minutia of the event.

In John 12:14 we read, *"Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it..."* Now, we're tempted to think that it was just that simple, *"Oh look, a donkey, let's use that."*

But if we look into the other Gospels, we see the preparation that went into the event.

Luke 19:29-31, *"As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, 'Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' say, 'The Lord needs it.'"*

Now we might be tempted to add a whole range of mystical applications here, that maybe this was a miracle or a step of faith on Jesus' behalf, you know, just do it and it will happen.

Chances are that Jesus knew the man and had arranged in advance for the donkey to be there.

The words *"The Lord needs it"* were probably a password so the man would know that he was giving the donkey to the right people.

I mean he'd feel kind of silly had the two disciples shown up and he had to tell them, *"I gave the donkey to two other guys who were here about an hour ago."*

We know that Jesus had friends in Bethany, that's where Mary, Martha and Lazarus lived and so it's not that far of a reach to see that Jesus had already put steps in place for His entrance to Jerusalem.

Which would lead me to suspect that if it were alright for Jesus to do preparation and not always wait until the last minute and then call on God in panic, that there might be a lesson there for us as well.

Luke gives us a few details about the colt that they brought back for Jesus to ride. We're told that it was the colt of a donkey and that it had never been ridden before.

Now that may not mean a whole lot to you and me but to the people of Jerusalem it meant a great deal.

Just in case they missed it, John reaches back into the Old Testament and pulls out a reference from the prophet Zechariah.

*Zechariah 9:9, "Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey."*

Jesus knew that the religious leaders were out to get Him and yet, instead of slinking into the city under the cover of darkness, He rides triumphantly in a manner that is bound to reveal Him as messiah.

William Barclay, who wrote the *Daily Study Bible Commentaries*, made this statement, *"It is a breath-taking thing to think of a man with a price upon his head, an outlaw, deliberately riding into a city in such a way that every eye was fixed upon him. It is impossible to exaggerate the sheer courage of Jesus."*

It's so easy to simply view Palm Sunday as an inconsequential event that led up to the main story, Easter.

But the Easter story hinges on what happened the week before, when Jesus rode into town on the back of a donkey. What happened that day sealed Jesus' fate.

### **Slide 3**

For the faithful, this was something that was anticipated. Jesus had been talking of His Kingdom from day one and His followers had been anticipating the coming of His kingdom almost from day one.

I don't think that the twelve gave up their former lives simply based on a future of following Jesus around from town to town relying on the charity of others to survive.

They were expecting things to change, and they were clinging to promises such as given in Luke 18.

*Luke 18:29-30, "Truly I tell you," Jesus said to them, "no one who has left home or wife or brothers or sisters or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age, and in the age to come eternal life."*

While there had always been crowds, they had only come to hear him teach and then they left, now they were looking to the future and talking about it.

John tells us in John 11:55-56, *"When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, many went up from the country to Jerusalem for their ceremonial cleansing before the Passover. They kept looking for Jesus, and as they stood in the temple courts they asked one another, "What do you think? Isn't he coming to the festival at all?"*

So, this day was different, this time they weren't greeting Jesus simply as a teacher, or as a Rabbi, instead they saw Him as the One who would deliver them.

Luke 19:36-38, *"As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road. When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"*

We don't know who all were there, but I would suspect that along with the twelve that probably Mary, Martha and Lazarus were there, no doubt Mary Magdalene, maybe Zaccheaus, Simon the leper and others whose lives and bodies Jesus had touched.

For many that day Jesus was not just an abstract or an ideal, He had changed their lives, and they were there to express their thanks and their adoration to Him.

Psalm 135:1 was a reality to them, and they were going to follow those words that said, *"Praise the Lord. Praise the name of the Lord; praise him, you servants of the Lord."*

I don't think that I'd be too far off in saying that most of us fall into that last category; Jesus is a real part of our lives.

We've made a decision to follow him and through His power and His grace our sins have been forgiven and when we come on Sunday mornings our praise is genuine.

But it wasn't just the faithful who were there. While we don't know how many people were present that day, the accounts seem to imply that it was a large crowd who came out to welcome him.

We are told in John 12:12-13, *“The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. 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!”*

#### **Slide 4**

For the crowd, this was something that was interesting. Call them what you like, the undecided or seekers, they heard the noise and wanted to find out what it was all about.

They probably got caught up in the excitement and began to sing and shout and wave palm branches, but they still weren't a hundred percent convinced that Jesus was the Messiah.

Perhaps they hadn't heard Him speak, or maybe they didn't know anyone whose life had been changed or who had been healed. So, they were there for themselves to find out what all the fuss was about.

Most of us don't come to know Jesus as Lord the first time we hear the message, as a matter of fact, most of us don't come the first half dozen times we hear the message.

It often takes time and multiple hearings before we come to the place that we're ready to surrender our lives to him.

For some it's fairly quick, for others it takes a little longer. The secret is that you remain open to God and open to His message.

Jeremiah 29:11-14a, *“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,” declares the Lord.*”

We know that less than two months later, after Jesus had been crucified, after Jesus had risen from the dead, after Jesus had taught for another forty days and ascended into heaven, after the Holy Spirit fell upon the small group of believers in Jerusalem and after Peter preached on the streets of Jerusalem, many went from merely being interested to becoming convinced.

*Acts 2:41, "Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day."*

So, if you're here today, but you've never made a decision to follow Christ continue to seek Him, but don't take too long.

Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 6:2, *"For he says, "In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you." I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation."*

Why today? Because you don't know what might happen tomorrow. Listen up, if you say *"I'm almost convinced,"* being 90% convinced is still lost. I'd hate to think that any one of you might slip into eternity without having the assurance of your salvation.

## **Slide 5**

We've looked at the entry, now let's focus on Judas. For Judas, this was something of a game changer. I'd suspect that we wouldn't have to look very far in the crowd that day in order to find Judas Iscariot.

Judas was one of the twelve, the treasurer of the group. Ultimately, he would be remembered through history as the one who betrayed Christ to the authorities.

Many people today know what a Judas is, without knowing who Judas was. Now, at this point, Judas hadn't talked to the high priest about a deal.

It would be another three or four days before Judas would go to the chief priests and ask what they'd be willing to pay if he would betray his friend.

But do you really think that the turning point came after the triumphant entry?

Do you think that half a week could make a man turn from being a committed follower of Jesus Christ into the one who would turn his friend and teacher over to be executed?

Whatever it was that turned Judas' heart had happened long before that last week. Something might have been said or done to trigger the incident, but the wheels were already in motion.

On the day that Jesus rode into town being proclaimed Messiah, Judas already knew that he had lost the first love that he had for Christ.

Judas' true nature is revealed in a story told by John in his Gospel. Jesus had already arrived in Bethany and was attending a dinner given in his honor.

His three friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus were all there. Martha was doing what Martha was always doing, preparing the food and serving it to all the guests, Lazarus was being a typical man in this situation and was doing nothing.

Now understand, Lazarus wasn't deliberately doing nothing, he probably looks around and doesn't see anything to do. Besides, he had recently been dead, so that must count for something.

The third sibling, Mary comes into the room with a container of perfume which she proceeds to pour over Jesus' feet, wiping it off with her hair.

A little bizarre but I'm sure that in that cultural and historical setting it must have been acceptable because no one jumps up and says, *"Wow, that was kind of strange."*

But someone does object, this is what we read in John 12:4-6, *"But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it."*

So, it appears that while Judas had all the outward trappings of one of the disciples on the outside, in here, where it counts, there had never been a transformation.

People probably looked at him and said, *"There's a follower of Christ, one of his disciples, he's a Christian."*

But Judas and God knew that was a lie. When he shouted hosanna that day he didn't mean it; he did it because it was expected of him.

On that day, he probably decided that he was backing the wrong horse, that if Jesus was going to accomplish everything that he dreamed of then things would have to change.

It was only four days later that we read, Matthew 26:14-16, *"Then one of the Twelve—the one called Judas Iscariot—went to the chief priests and asked, "What are you willing to give me if I deliver him over to you?" So they counted out for him thirty pieces of silver. From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over."*

Even with all of those players, the story wasn't complete. What set everything in motion toward what we now call Good Friday is revealed in John 11.

John 11:57, *“But the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that anyone who found out where Jesus was should report it so that they might arrest him.”*

## **Slide 6**

### Conclusion

For the authorities Palm Sunday was something that was feared. They weren't shouting, they weren't singing or waving palm branches or laying their coats down. They weren't the least bit interested in being identified with Jesus.

I mean, you must give them credit, at least they were honest about it; they weren't pretending. They had their minds made up; they weren't going to believe in Him, no matter what.

It didn't matter how many miracles they witnessed or how many times they saw lives changed, they had already made a decision to not follow Jesus.

We'll never know what it was that kept them away, pride, sin or the fear of losing control, but it was something.

Yet, not all of the religious leaders were like that, in the Gospels we read about men like Nicodemus the Pharisee and Jairus the ruler of the Synagogue.

But the majority of them, if they had a favorite hymn, it would have been, *“I Will Not Be Moved.”* If they were in the crowd that day, they were standing with their arms crossed and frowning.

I don't know what it was that kept the authorities from believing that Jesus was the Messiah. Maybe they just didn't want to believe that Jesus was the Messiah because that wouldn't fit in with their plans.

I think they were like the atheist George Orwell described in *Animal Farm* when he wrote, *“He was an embittered atheist (the sort of atheist who does not so much disbelieve in God as personally dislikes Him).”*

It’s interesting to note that by the time the religious leaders got to this point, they weren’t denying His miracles or trying to explain them away anymore.

So overwhelming was the evidence for the miracles that had been performed that Jesus’ enemies simply accepted them as fact.

The only question that remained for them was what to do with Him. If they had any doubts about their decision, those doubts were swept away by the outpouring of support they witnessed on Palm Sunday.

It was at that point we read in John 12:19, *“Then the Pharisees said to each other, “There’s nothing we can do. Look, everyone has gone after him!”*

Which brought them to the only decision that they felt they could make, and that was: Jesus must die and just like that, the fix was in.