

## Visible Means Hinder Faith

Zechariah 9:9

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

It's just very difficult to make sense of the Palm Sunday scene. I don't know if you have ever thought of it but it is difficult to make sense of it because Jesus is entering Jerusalem with, in a way, all the trappings of a Roman Emperor entering the eternal city of Rome. People have palm branches that they're waving and the crowds are shouting and yet when you look at the central figure of the scene, you see a gentle, quiet, white-robed figure sitting on a little donkey.

So if you have seen, as some of us have, the great paintings of this event, they're always a little unsatisfactory because on the one hand you have all this great uproar and all this public effusive expression of affection and on the other, you have this gentle, white-robed figure sitting on a little donkey and it just doesn't seem to make sense. It's kind of a paradox.

You know you may say, "Well, it may be a paradox to all us Gentiles who identify power and strength and force with an outward show of physical strength and physical force but it wasn't a paradox to the Jewish people because they knew that Zechariah, their prophet had foretold that their messiah would come into Jerusalem riding on a donkey and so for them, it wasn't a paradox."

Yet it is interesting loved ones when you look at that original prophecy, the paradox is almost built even more starkly into the prophecy by Zechariah. Now if you wanted to see that, you could look at it where it occurred in the Old Testament, it's Zechariah 9:9 and Zechariah is virtually the last book in the Old Testament. Zechariah 9:9 is the prophecy that made sense of this event to the Jewish people who were looking on.

Zechariah 9:9, "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass." You see what I mean, you see the two lines are almost juxtaposed, "Triumphant and victorious is he", so there's the great victory and then the next line, "Humble and riding on an ass", and so, it's almost as if Jesus is making fun of outward physical strength and power. It's almost a comic figure to think of this man riding on a donkey in the midst of all these people who are giving him an emperor's welcome.

You'd almost think, you know it's Jesus saying the same kind of thing as he said before, "Look, my kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, then my disciples would fight", except that, he does accept the terms "triumphant" and "victorious" and he accepts, you must admit, the cheers of the crowd and he allows himself to enter on the donkey and the Creator of the world obviously arranged that it would be that way and that's why he put the prophecy in Zechariah's mouth.

So I wonder what meaning this Palm Sunday event has for you and me because you know what the Bible says. Well, you should look at it if you haven't been here the past few weeks. Romans 15:4 is the verse that makes it clear that God has something in this event for us today.

Romans 15:4, "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by

steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope." So this was written for our encouragement and you know we've been studying the encouragement of God and how he makes himself alive in our situations today in our life. Now, what does this say to us?

Well, first of all, if you had been a Roman soldier on that day or you had been a Jewish high priest and you saw this slight figure riding on this little donkey, the first fact that would have hit you square between the eyes is, this man is not going to become a king by force of arms. If he becomes a king at all, he certainly isn't going to become a king by force of arms because he is in no way a military conqueror as far as we can see.

So that's the first fact that we get that this man who was going to become a king, was going to become a king by means other than the visible means and methods that you and I usually accept. I mean we can see Hitler with his panzer divisions moving in. We can see Bismarck further back moving in with his armies. We can see the Montgomery moving in or Eisenhower moving in with the armor and the weapons and we understand that kind of rule and power but obviously this man, if he was going to become a king, he was not going to become a king using the usual, visible means and methods that we understand in our world.

Actually, that has become the verdict of history. There's a man called Shaff and some of you who maybe study theology, know of Shaff's church history volumes and Shaff says this, "This Jesus of Nazareth, without money and arms conquered more millions than Alexander, Cesar, Mohammad and Napoleon, without science and learning, he shed more light on matters human and divine, than all philosophers and scholars combined, without the eloquence of schools, he spoke such words of life as were never spoken before or since and produced effects which lie beyond the reach of orator or poet, without writing a single line he set more pens in motion and furnished things for more sermons, orations, discussions, learned volumes, works of arts and songs of praise than the whole army of great men of ancient and modern times."

Undoubtedly that's true. Jesus has become the greatest king of the earth without using the normal visible means that we all understand bring power and bring rule. And actually you must admit the same is true when you think of his resurrection. I mean the resurrected body did not have the visible symptoms and signs of health that you and I normally attach to a living person. Maybe you'd just look at the piece that makes that clear. It's John 20:24-29 and it's one of the incidents that took place after Jesus' resurrection.

John 20:24-29, "Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe.' Eight days later, his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. The doors were shut, but Jesus came and stood among them, and said, 'Peace be with you.'" Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.'"

In other words, his physical body did not have the outward visible means of life-support that you and I normally attach to that kind of health. I mean there was a gaping wound in the side that was still open and the blood was not flowing out of it. There were holes in His hands and the blood was not flowing out.

The blood obviously was in some way either still circulating in his body or else he was able to maintain physical life apart from even the circulation of blood and yet you must admit he was able to be touched. I mean they could touch him so he had a material body and yet it was a body that obviously could go through walls and yet it was a body that could eat fried fish on the lakeshore. That morning they had breakfast together.

So you can see clearly that Jesus was somehow able to reproduce a life that affected and touched our touch-and-see world here, and yet he did not need the visible means or methods that we need to create such a life. Actually you must admit the miracles are full of that. I mean it's amazing. Look at that miracle, you know that we all learned about at Sunday school, it's Matthew 14:15.

Matthew 14:15, "When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a lonely place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus said, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They said to him, "We have only five loaves here and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass; and taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke and gave the loaves to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children."

So, he does the same thing. He takes five loaves and two fish and he starts breaking them up, blessing them, and dividing them. And the disciples come and they take the bread from him and he keeps breaking the same five loaves and two fishes. And each time they come back, all he's doing is breaking these five loaves and two fishes and you see, if you and I had been there and we had got our spectacles on and our microscopes and looked extremely well, we'd still see just him breaking five loaves and two fishes. You wouldn't see him slipping some out from his pocket you know or performing some miracle and bringing new ones in or the wine, a miracle he did before. All he was doing was just breaking five loaves and two fish.

In other words, he was able to affect the physical world here without the normal visible means that we would need. We would need the baker's van to come in with all the loaves and we'd need a fishing boat to come in with a new catch and then we'd start breaking it up. He was able to take the loaves and the fishes that he had and just keep breaking them and it didn't matter how close you looked, all you'd have seen was him breaking five loaves and two fish.

Now, what's the message from Palm Sunday that God and his son Jesus work in your lives and mine apart from the visible means and methods that we usually need to produce the same results? What's the message to us? If you had been with Joshua, walking around the walls of Jericho, there would have been no point in you getting the binoculars out on the first time around looking for cracks in the walls. "Does that look like a crack?"

There'd have been no cracks. Even when you got to the third time around the walls, there's no point in going up and trying to feel for cracks. Is it about to happen or the walls are about to come down? I'm believing you, Lord that you're going to bring Jericho's walls down or the cracks there, there had been no cracks.

Even when you go to the seventh time going around, there would still be no cracks because God works independent and apart from the visible means and symptoms that you and I are used to, therefore,

when you pray for your loved one to change and you start looking for the change, you are immediately walking by sight and not by faith and so you make the change impossible.

When you pray for the Lord to deliver you from your financial difficulties and you start watching the mail, watching the mail, it might come in the mail. Or you start watching your friends and saying if they're looking particularly generous towards you. Or you start looking at your salary envelope and hoping that it'll maybe be bigger. When you start doing that, you're walking by sight, looking for the visible means that God doesn't use anyway.

God does not use the normal visible means that we use to bring about his miracles. And so when you pray for your boss or for a certain situation at work where there's tension or conflict and then you start coming in the next day looking to see if he is a little gentler in his walk or if he slammed the door a little less than he did before -- or you begin to look at your colleague and see are they being a little kindly to me -- you're immediately walking by sight and not by faith and you're preventing God continuing his work. Because his work is done apart from the visible means and methods that you and I normally accept and understand.

That's the first thing that I think God is trying to say to us through Palm Sunday. That God listens to your prayer and mine, and in response to our faith he is operating -- and he expects you to walk by faith and not by sight because if you walk by sight, you're looking for visual signs that he doesn't even need.

That's why, in a way, Susan's situation is not as bad as we all think. You know with the metastasis. She is the lady you remember that is in Switzerland and has so much cancer all through her body that her little baby pokes her rib you know and breaks it. Because God heals independent of physical signs or symptoms or physical means, he doesn't gradually make you better and better, he doesn't actually even need to make you better in the world's eyes. He obviously, with a gaping wound in his side and holes in his hands, he is able to maintain physical life without the normal physical symptoms that we associate with health.

But loved ones, there's something else that God is saying through the Palm Sunday thing. I mean after all, you must admit the Creator actually did not make it easy for us to believe that Jesus was the king. I mean he made him ride on a donkey. I mean that's what a clown rides on, a donkey, it's such a silly looking little animal. You don't put a king on a donkey. Why did the Creator put his son, the king of all the universe on a donkey? Why didn't he put him at least on a strong horse or maybe a white charger or something that would help us to believe that he was the king?

Here's the answer. Visible means actually hinder faith. Visible means actually hinder faith. I know it sounds strange to us but the presence of visible means actually hinders our faith. You know this so you needn't be surprised. You know that you have sunk utterly and completely into God when the thing was absolutely, to human eyes, hopeless. That's when you had your deepest moments of faith in God -- when the thing was absolutely hopeless. Because the truth is, we constantly think that visible means -- you know, if a thing looks as if it might with a little help from God's grace work -- then we'll be able to have faith. No, we won't.

Visible means actually hinder faith. Visible means encourage you to hope that the thing might still turn out right by its own natural power and prevent you from leaning utterly and completely on God. And the proof of that you know is that the event that we read about in Abraham's life, if you just like to look at it, it's Romans 4:18. It stated very plainly there that whole principle. Remember

God promised Abraham who was 100 years of age and Sara who was 90 that they were going to have a baby, which was somewhat of a surprise to them and then you find in Romans 4:18.

Romans 4:18, "In hope, Abraham, he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations; as he had been told, 'So shall your descendants be.'" Do you see that? "In hope, he believed against hope." Actually in divine hope that God would do what he had said he would do, he had to believe in that divine hope against his human hope because all of us are buoyed up by visible means.

We all are! Okay, there's this old lady, 90 years of age and if we can see, "Well, she looks remarkably sprightly for a 90-year-old", then there begins to creep into our minds the thought, "Well, maybe she could have a child, who knows? I mean maybe she's a remarkable woman." But if she's 90 and obviously old and almost at death-door and you're 100 and you're worn out and your body is finished, then there's no hope from the body. There's no hope from the visible means. There's no human hope.

Human hope is looking at things as they are in this natural world and hoping that by the normal laws of health and nature, the thing will turn out all right and it's interesting that Abraham had to ditch that hope completely in order to believe in real hope. In the hope that God would keep his promise and that whatsoever you desire when you pray, believe that you'll receive it and you will have it. Now, loved ones it's the same for us.

Visible means are actually a detriment and a disadvantage to faith because they keep us from putting our whole faith in God and they keep stealing away some of our faith that maybe it'll come about anyway by natural means, "All you have to do Lord is give it a little bit of a push", and God wants us to see plainly that there is only one power on earth that will heal us and there's only one power on earth that will deliver us and answer us in our difficulties -- financial, domestic, emotional -- and that is his power. And his power not only works apart from visible means but actually is hindered by visible means and by the presence of visible means.

Why else did God arrange for nobody in that crowd of 5,000 to have any food with them except one little guy who had five loaves and two fish. Why? Why else did God arrange for the only man in all of Saul's army who would volunteer to fight against Goliath, why did he arrange for that man to be the youngest little son of Jessie's family of boys? Why else did God arrange for the reduction of Gideon's 32,000 possibly victorious soldiers to reduce it down to the utterly sure to be defeated 300?

If it weren't for the fact that God is determined to show us that faith in him does not come from looking at the visible means, looking at the industry averages and calculating the odds and then saying with a little bit of help from our friends, with a little bit of help from God, maybe we'll pull this off. God wants us to see the two are antagonistic to each other. Visible means does not help faith.

Faith comes from one place only. That's the flaw in us believing that our faith is stirred by reading stories of others' healing. I know we all feel that. We all feel that, that's why we love to get hold of those books. "Oh God did it for that person, he did it for that person, he did for that person", and it's our rational way of thinking. If he did it for that person then he'll do it for me and we kind of think we're strengthening our faith. Your faith is not strengthened by that one iota; your human hope is strengthened by that; your natural mind is strengthened by that. Only one thing

strengthens faith and it's Romans 10:17, loved ones.

Romans 10:17, "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ." That's the only thing that strengthens our faith. Faith comes from hearing and hearing comes from the word of God or from the word of Christ, from God speaking to you in quietness in your own prayer times. From God coming through and speaking to you through his word at times, or bringing his word to your remembrance in prayer, that's what builds up your faith. Faith doesn't actually come from reading all kinds of records of others' healing. That is just study of the visible means.

Now, do you see the position that Susan is really in? She's not in a worse position than all of us for believing for healing. She's in a better position. She is in a better position. Her body is breaking up all over. There are no visible means available to her. There's no sign that she's naturally going to get well. There's nothing but defeat in the visible means. She's in a far better position to have absolute faith in God.

So loved ones, you who are here this morning you know, if the old body is in trouble or if your own life is in difficulties or your family or your finances are bad or your job situation is in difficulties, you're in a far better position to have faith in God than when everything was going well. Don't think, "Oh, if it were easier. If it were an easier situation, God could work in it". No, no, thank God that in human eyes, the situation is hopeless.

Thank God that in human eyes, the situation is hopeless and then look to God and then He sure that there'll be no glory shared, there'll be no glory shared in the deal. There'll be no, "Well, I had a good doctor", or, "Well, we were rather clever with our advertising", or, "We were rather clever with the way we arranged our investments", there'll be no sharing of glory. There'll just be God's glory only because God works apart from visible means, apart from sight of any kind and faith in him is not helped by visible means, it is hindered.

So the worse your situation is, the better is the opportunity for you now to put your complete faith in God and I would encourage you whatever the situation is this morning, whether it's with your body or it's with your business situation or your finances or whether it's with your relationship that you have, I'd encourage you to put your faith now in God and then not to look for any cracks in the walls of Jericho, not to start living on tenterhooks to see the first sign that God is answering. Be moved not by what you see but by what you believe and go out of here absolutely confident that the Lord God is going to answer you independent of visible means.

We have a dear friend, well really he is Gentry's friend first but he's a dear man who had his leg twisted like a corkscrew in a motorcycle accident. The doctor X-rays it, he says, "It's not healed", but the man walks flawlessly and has walked so for 5 or 6 years. God operates independent of the visible signs of health and the visible means of financial success that we have grown used to. God works through our faith, not through our sight. Let us pray.

Father, we come before you now to say that we have received from you, the message of this Palm Sunday and we see Lord how Jesus, your Son, our Savior, conquered the world riding on a donkey without any visible means and we see too Lord, that the absence of visible means is rather a help to faith instead of a hindrance. So Lord, we thank you for clarifying for us the difference between human hope and divine hope. We thank you Lord for clarifying for us how we either walk by faith or we walk by sight and how we cut ourselves off from your spiritual power when we walk by sight and now Lord we bring before you the bodies here that need healed.

Lord, we bring these dear bodies into your presence. Lord, we are not asking to walk free from pain in our life. We're willing to walk as you walked. We're not asking Lord for all kinds of wonderful symptoms to disappear so that everybody can be excited about it but Lord we are asking that you would heal each body that needs healed today so that it would have the strength to carry on by your life, whether there's a gaping wound in the side or nail holes still in the side and in the hands, or whether the x-ray still show that the disease is there.

Lord, we ask now that you will heal us as you were healed on Calvary, that you would heal us and give us the strength to live as long as we need to live to accomplish all the things you want us to accomplish and Lord we commit ourselves to walk in by faith from now on about this -- and to stop being discouraged or cast down every time we see an x-ray that shows the opposite or every time we feel a pain or a symptom.

Lord, we commit ourselves to walking by faith so that it may be unto us according to our faith and then Lord, we would bring before you any financial situations that we are involved in that are in difficulties, any business situations that are a problem, any relationships that are tense or wrong today. Lord, we ask you now, you said, "If you ask, it will be given to you. He who asks receives." Lord, we're going to take our asking as receiving and we're going to ask you now in Jesus' name to heal and completely change and rectify these situations and now Lord we believe that you've heard us. You said, "Whatsoever you desire when you pray, believe that you receive it and you will have it." Lord, we believe that you've heard us and we commit ourselves to walking by faith now.

Lord, we will not look for the mail. We will not look for the boss's smile. We will not look Lord for a visible improvement in the relationship. We will not look even for more orders. Lord, we have asked you to deal with these situations and to rectify them as you have already disentangled all the knots in Jesus' death on Calvary and now we accept, Father, that you've heard us and that you will answer us and we want to thank you Lord this morning that you are a God that works apart from visible means and that our faith is helped by the lack of those visible means rather than hindered.

Lord, we thank you for showing us that we human beings are naturally buoyed up by visible means. We're naturally buoyed up by every little word that encourages us about the way things appear. Lord we reject that now. We refuse to be buoyed up by the appearance of things. We are going to be buoyed up and believe for one reason: because you have said it and we believe it. Thank you, Father.

We give ourselves to you to walk throughout this week and throughout the rest of our life in this blessed faith. Now, the grace of our Lord Jesus and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of us now and evermore. Amen.