

Have you ever received a gift that at first you really weren't sure about, but then over time found that you actually enjoy it a lot and use it frequently? Maybe a sweater that looked a little questionable but then turned out to be the most comfortable thing you've ever put on, or a strange tool or gadget that you toss into a drawer and forget about, but then you finally figure out what it actually does and then it's the best thing since sliced bread? Or perhaps you picked out something, and thought it would be the best thing ever, and you begged your parents for it nonstop... but then when it comes, well, it's just not up to what you expected?

Our judgment about gifts we receive, especially at first glance, is often not quite accurate. We see this when Jesus comes to Jerusalem for the last time. The Jews think they're getting one thing, but it turns out to be something else entirely – and much better than they could've thought. As we consider the coming of Christ in this season of Advent, we do well to reflect on what we imagine it to be.

So as Christ comes into Jerusalem, and in the years leading up to this point, there are a lot of ideas about what He's coming to do.

Some see Him as a political savior. Surely, since He is the Son of David, the King of Israel, He'll be kicking out the hated Romans, giving them a taste of that divine power that had crushed the Egyptians and wiped out even Assyria's great armies. Jesus will bring back the good old days, when the Jews were independent, able to live as they wanted. No more being governed by bureaucrats half a world away who have no idea what things are actually like here in Judea.

Others see Jesus as a path to worldly comfort and plenty. He has produced food for thousands from just a single lunch. He could no doubt replicate the miracles of the prophets, creating oil bottles and flour jars that never run out. And if he can do that with bread and fish, who's to say He can't with gold and silver? No one will need to be poor with Jesus on the throne!

Still others see Jesus as an instant fix for whatever ails them. Since Jesus can cure anything and everything, from paralysis to deafness, from bleeding to demonic possession, all their troubles are gone. Why, since He has raised people from the dead, with Jesus around, they might just live forever! It will be great! Hosanna to the Son of David indeed!

All these people will be greatly disappointed, initially. To those who wanted a political messiah, Jesus would tell them to "render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's." He would tell Peter to put his sword back in its sheath, pointing out that, while He could call down an army that could reduce any worldly power to ashes, He had to suffer so that Scripture would be fulfilled. And as He stood face-to-face with the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, Jesus would declare that all earthly authority ultimately comes from God, even when the rulers are weak or wicked.

To those who wanted a messiah to bring wealth and plenty to the land, Jesus had years before forsaken the kingdoms of the earth and their riches and splendor. He, rather, was the Messiah who told His followers to forsake their earthly wealth and instead build up treasures in heaven. While foxes

have dens and birds have nests, He – the Son of Man – didn't have even a shack to call His own. He declared that, "the poor you will always have with you," not validating the economic oppression of others, but pointing out an obvious consequence of sin.

And as to those who desired Jesus to be a genie in a bottle, a divine wish-fulfiller, they too would be disappointed. Consider the words He had spoken to those in His hometown of Nazareth, who wanted to get special treatment because He was their "hometown boy." "But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land, and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian."

God has never been a tool to be used by His people. He does great works and wonders, but only where He knows is best, in accordance with His infinite wisdom and perfect knowledge. And He, the Lord, shows no partiality.

So why has Jesus come? Are all those hopes of the Jews on Palm Sunday totally and completely dashed? No, actually. Sort of like that gift you thought wasn't any good but then realized it is the best thing ever, Jesus will fulfill all these hopes, not in ways desired by sinful flesh, but in the perfection ordained by God Himself.

Though His kingdom is not of this world, Jesus had come to bring in a greater kingdom: the Kingdom of Heaven. His is an everlasting kingdom, and those who are brought into it are preserved by Him for eternity. On earth, it will not look like much, just a bunch of people gathered around His word and Sacraments, but the reality behind those things is incredible.

With such simple means, His kingdom will rule in the very hearts of men, transcending and outlasting every human kingdom. Above His cross, Pilate will proclaim Him "King of the Jews," and so He is, but of the true and eternal Israel, the Israel of promise, the Israel of faith.

Jesus will also grant riches beyond those humans can imagine. Earthly riches always leave one wanting more, but those of heaven grant true satisfaction. Everything in this life will pass away, breaking down with time, destroyed by rust, eaten by moths. But the riches He grants are heavenly, crowns of righteousness that shine with heavenly splendor, robes of righteousness that never fade.

Unlike the gifts we get that we anticipate so much but then lose their shine and are soon forgotten, the gifts Christ freely gives are things we will only ever grow in our appreciation for as we thank and praise Him gathered before His throne.

And as for those who desire Jesus to cure all their problems, to fulfill all their wishes, this again will be done, but in a way far greater than they imagine. All those He healed in this life still had a big problem: they were still in this life. Jesus may have cured them of one thing, but they were certain to have other illness, other problems, other suffering that still was yet to come. Even the people that Jesus raised from the dead would still end up dying again.

But Jesus came to grant final release from suffering, life that would never be overcome by death. Jesus came to bring His people to paradise, where suffering and sorrow are not existent. Jesus came that the people might have fulfillment of their desires, not by giving them what their sinful flesh desired, for that would be bad for them in the long run, but rather to remake their hearts and minds so that they desire what is truly, lastingly good for them. As the Bible tells us, “it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

Jesus would accomplish all this – give the gift – in the most unexpected of ways. He would reign as king, not from a golden throne, but a wooden cross. He would grant riches through his prayer, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” He would grant restoration to a repentant thief, declaring that that very day, the man would be with Him in paradise. Jesus, the God who grants life, would suffer death, that life might be given to all who believe.

Would anyone who was waving palm branches and crying hosanna have expected any of this? Would they have believed it when you said the best thing for them was that this man on a donkey would be crucified several days later? Certainly not! But Jesus knew the best thing for them, and gave it to them, even if they didn’t know what they were getting at the time.

As we prepare ourselves for the coming of Jesus – which is the focus of the season of Advent – we should reflect on our expectations of what Jesus brings. Are they guided by our flesh, or by God’s Word?

Perhaps we might ask if we see Jesus as a political Messiah, as did the Jews. Now, we probably aren’t thinking of Jesus coming down and physically ruling from Washington DC or Jerusalem, though there are groups out there that believe such things. More common, it seems, are two other trains of thought.

The first is to see political figures as messiahs and saviors of sorts – fill-ins for Jesus. People speak of political candidates as either going to save the world or destroy the world, depending on their opinions. While it is true that God is the one who ultimately grants worldly authority, we shouldn’t pin all our hopes on who is or isn’t in positions of worldly authority. We honor our leaders, and we pray for them, but we place our trust and hope in Christ, who is the King of Kings and will turn all things to the good of His people.

The second way in which we might have flawed expectations here is to crash into the opposite ditch and say that, since Jesus is king, I can completely withdraw from civil society. All things are in His hands, so why vote, or write my congressman, or attend city council meetings? Here we must remember that God has caused us to live in this time and place, and He has given us the ability to do things such as vote or speak out in the public square. He tells us in His word, “Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.” So while yes, Jesus is Lord and God’s will will be done, we also should seek to do that will and declare the words of the Lord Jesus, that our people may be blessed.

Besides looking for a political messiah, we might also be tempted to see Jesus as a way to prosperity. The thought goes that, if I just love Jesus enough, if I just have enough faith, if I just obey enough, then my life will become so much better. False teachers happily peddle this perversion of Christianity, often connecting “having enough faith” to sending them money so they can buy a mansion or a Mercedes Benz – all to the glory of God, of course.

But we too might have prosperity as our goal when we’re tempted to take certain verses from Scripture out of context. For example, Philippians 4:13 – “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” That doesn’t mean that my business ventures will succeed or I’ll get a raise or I’ll win whatever athletic event I’m in if I just have enough Jesus. St. Paul wrote those words from a prison cell, and did so to point out the wonderful truth that, in whatever situation we might find ourselves, good or bad, Christ will strengthen us and bring us through it.

Finally, we must guard against the temptation to see Jesus as a cosmic genie or wish-fulfillment machine, a tool that we have at our disposal to make our lives better. This isn’t only in worldly prosperity, as we just discussed, but also the idea that being a faithful Christian means that we won’t have to suffer. It is true that following God’s word does make things go better from a worldly perspective. For example, a society where people don’t steal, lie, and cheat on their spouses tends to be much more pleasant and run much more smoothly than one where those sins occur regularly.

But remember, Jesus tells us that in this world we are going to have tribulation. We shouldn’t think that we’ll always have things go our way because we believe. But by the same token, we shouldn’t see times of suffering or hardship as evidence that God doesn’t love us. God’s love for us is a constant in the ever-changing world.

That love is proven by the fact that, two thousand years ago, Jesus rode into Jerusalem, acclaimed by a crowd who didn’t rightly understand why He had come, and who would initially be very disappointed and upset, even enraged, when they did see the truth. But still He came, that He might grant them blessings even greater than what they imagined. That love of God in Christ is still present for you. Despite the fact that we are sinners, Jesus rode into Jerusalem and hung on the cross for you and me as well.

And not only did He come two thousand years ago, He still comes to us in His Word and His Sacrament, still granting forgiveness, life, and salvation to His people. This Advent, let us humble ourselves before our King, not looking to what our flesh would desire of Him, but looking to what He promises to us in His word, so that whenever it is that He comes for the final time in glory, we will see Him as He is: the greatest gift ever given.

In Jesus’ name, amen.