

Supernaturally Natural

Mark 11:1-11

Introduction - Is There A Line Between Supernatural and Natural?

What is more amazing, a person being given the spiritual gifts of tongues, where God blesses a person with an ability to speak in another language or a divine language, or the person who sweats and slogs away, enduring the embarrassment of sounding like a child, to learn another language well to share Jesus with people who speak that language?

Consider the dramatic answers to prayer which Robert Mueller and his orphanage experienced where food and necessities would regularly just appear when no one except God was told about the need. One example was when a milk cart stopped outside the orphanage and the deliveryman said that he couldn't make any more deliveries and so the children could take as much as they wanted. What's more amazing, that, or the Christian businessman who prays every day for wisdom and for strength to act with integrity so that he can endure a cutthroat world and still be kind-hearted and generous to others?

What is more amazing, that Alison went from having one leg about an inch shorter than the other and needing to wear modified shoes to being healed with both legs the same length, or the fact that Alison loves and trusts Jesus with all her heart?

We have a natural tendency to look at more dramatic accounts or reports that are more clearly outside the realm of normality and see in them the hand of God. Today we're going to look at a story which can be explained through the supernatural knowledge of Jesus or it could be explained through more normal means and yet either reading of this passage will show God's power at work.

Supernatural Knowing About A Donkey (vv. 1-6)

We start with Jesus sending off his disciples to collect a colt in the town ahead and we're not sure how Jesus has the knowledge that he has.

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples, saying to them, ‘Go to the village ahead of you, and just 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 doing this?” say, “The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.”’

They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, some people standing there asked, ‘What are you doing, untying that colt?’ They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go.

Do we have here an account of Jesus supernaturally knowing that there is a colt that has never been ridden in the town ahead? Now there’s part of me that loves this idea, if for no other reason than for the mental images it gives of the two disciples going into the town. Can you imagine it?

“So what do you think we’re going to find?”

“You mean will we find a colt?”

Well, yeah! But also, what if we find more than one?”

“Jesus said we’re to take the one that’s never been ridden?”

“And how are we to know that?! Honestly! What are you going to do, ask it?”

“Alright, no need to get snarky! Anyway, I was thinking about the other part.”

“What other part?”

“The part where people ask us what we’re doing. Do you think they’re just going to believe us and say, ‘sure you can wander off with the donkey, we totally believe that you’ll bring it back.’”

“Oh yeah, I see you point. You don’t think we could just pop back and tell Jesus ... Oh forget it, we’re just about there.”

“Let’s see how we go.”

And there’s part of me, with my sense of humour, that loves this idea as I can picture Jesus smiling as these two disciples take this step of faith and for their faith to grow as Jesus’ words to them are proved to be accurate.

So there you go, a story that shows the powerful hand of God through Jesus supernatural insight that there is a colt up ahead and this can serve to grow our faith because we recognise the power of Jesus and can rest assured that nothing takes Jesus by surprise.

Natural Knowing About A Donkey (vv. 1-6)

But is that the only way of understanding this report? It may be that there is a less dramatic explanation. Now before I give this explanation, I'm sure that people who have heard me preach already know this but just to be clear, let me affirm that I have no problems with the supernatural and with Jesus performing miracles. I firmly believe in such works of God but I also believe that God works in other ways and we may have such a situation here.

How else can we understand this account of Jesus sending his disciples ahead to collect the colt? Well, what if the owner was with Jesus and told him where he could find the donkey? Now a fair question to ask is, "Why do I think it might be that the owner was with Jesus?" Well, as I've indicated, it's not because I have a problem with the miraculous but because of a little word that Jesus uses here. In verse 3 Jesus tells his disciples, "If anyone asks you, "Why are you doing this?" say, "The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.'" The little word I'm thinking about is 'Lord.' You may be aware that 'Lord' was used in place of God's name, Yahweh, in the Greek translations of the Old Testament and this continues in our English Bibles any time you see LORD spelt all with capitals. Jesus is also described as our Lord and Saviour and so when people read Jesus instructing his disciples, "say, 'The Lord needs it,'" it's not surprising that people make a connection to Jesus and see him effectively saying, "I have need of it." This is why 'The Lord' is spelt with a capital T and L in many English Bibles. That understanding is indeed possible and gives us the meaning we considered earlier.

However, in Mark's Gospel Jesus never elsewhere uses Lord to describe himself and 'lord' can simply mean owner. If the owner of the donkey had told Jesus that he had a donkey in the next town and that Jesus could use it this would also add understanding as to why Jesus' instructions to his disciples are about, 'If anyone asks you, "Why are you doing this?"' Not, "If the owner asks you .." Jesus knew the owner wouldn't be asking about it because the owner is with Jesus and instead tells his disciple to inform the people that the owner has asked for it.

What happens to this story if it's the owner of the donkey who has told Jesus about where to find it and given him permission to collect it? The story sounds less dramatic but, like my questions at the start of this sermon, is it less amazing?

I know this is just a suggestion but think about it for a moment. We have a man who owns a donkey and has been hanging out with Jesus for a period of time. It's probably not long from the feel of the story but it's long enough for this man to see the way Jesus operates, how he teaches and the power which Jesus has and this man begins to grasp that Jesus is God's anointed one, the Messiah. Not only that but this man recognises that Jesus isn't the kind of political and military leader that people might have talked about, there was something different about Jesus.

Perhaps the scene is that the owner of the donkey approaches Jesus and says, "I remember that the prophet Zechariah wrote, '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.' You know Jesus, it's interesting that Zechariah saw that the victorious king came to Jerusalem in humility, riding on a donkey's foal. I was just thinking and stop me if I'm on the wrong path here, but I have a colt in the next town which has never been ridden. I could really picture you riding that foal into Jerusalem, Jesus."

No, it's not as dramatic as Jesus knowing at a distance that there was a colt in the next town but if you think about it, isn't it just as amazing? Whether this proposed scenario with a donkey's owner happened or not, it's true that one of the most amazing supernatural work God ever does is to open our eyes as to who Jesus is.

If you love Jesus and trust that Jesus is the Messiah, God's anointed king who rescues people and that rescue includes you, then stop for a moment and give thanks that you are a miracle! It is so amazing for someone to turn away their own way of doing things and to put their trust in Jesus that there is rejoicing in heaven when this occurs. And not only when we first trusted Jesus, but the amazing work of God continues when we keep seeking to live in step with the Holy Spirit and so honour our Father wherever he has us.

The Hope of the Crowd (vv. 7-11)

Let's turn back to Mark 11 and continue with the story.

When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, 'Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

Whatever way Jesus knew about the donkey, the disciples return with the colt and put their cloaks on it as a saddle. The crowd, some of whom may have been following Jesus for a while and so already had higher expectations, sees Jesus riding on a donkey and perhaps also remember those words from 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." Now there is a real sense of anticipation as the crowd calls out for God to act - to work through the Messiah to save them.

Hosanna means 'save!' and the crowd connects it with the Messianic hope of the Davidic Kingdom. This Davidic king comes in the name of the Lord. 'Lord' here is clearly being used for Yahweh and 'name' means to come with the authority and character of the person. The Davidic king come with the authority and having the character of Yahweh to establish his kingdom.

In all honesty, although there's a fair bit of excitement as the crowd cries out like this as they approach Jerusalem, it's not fully clear how much they fully grasped of the situation. Did they really see Jesus as the Messianic king or were they just getting swept up in the emotion of what others were saying and because they were near Jerusalem, the spiritually most important place for the Jews. It appears that the crowd fairly quickly disappears into the background upon their arrival in Jerusalem.

However, while the crowd may have not been certain as to whether Jesus really was the coming king, it's interesting to note what Jesus does on coming to Jerusalem. Jesus does what a king does on arrival in part of their domain, he performs a thorough inspection. "Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve."

Related to what we've been discussing in this message, Jesus actions here are far less dramatic than the enthusiastic shouting and actions of the crowd but they're incredibly important. Jesus' simple action here of inspecting the temple, similarly to how an arriving king inspects a city, is actually amazing as it sets the scene for not only the coming chapters but also the rising tensions with those who will reject him as their king and which ultimately leads to his crucifixion.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we're trained by the media and maybe by our own nature to pursue the dramatic and spectacular and yet God's work in each one of us, often in the relatively mundane aspects of life, is actually truly amazing. When your love for Jesus prompts you to walk with the Spirit to be a good parent, caring friend, supportive neighbour, consistent Bible reader, faithful prayer, committed church member, etc. then that is living out the character of God's kingdom ... and that's amazing. Don't belittle it, give thanks for it.

We're now going to do one of those little mundane things which becomes amazing when we do it for our Father's glory, we're going to take up the collection to support the ministries of God's church.