

Palm Sunday: Lk. 19:28-44 The Return of the King

Let's Pray: Heavenly Father, allow us to understand your holy Word according to your divine will, that we may learn from it to put all confidence in you alone. More than this, that through your Word, our sinful nature may be crucified with Christ more and more each day, and that we may offer ourselves to you as a living sacrifice, to the glory of your holy name, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Luke 19:28-44

After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. ²⁹ As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, ³⁰ "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. ³¹ If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' say, 'The Lord needs it.'"

³² Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. ³³ As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?"

³⁴ They replied, "The Lord needs it."

³⁵ They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. ³⁶ As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road.

³⁷ 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:

³⁸ "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"

³⁹ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!"

⁴⁰ "I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."

⁴¹ As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it ⁴² and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. ⁴³ The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. ⁴⁴ They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you."

This is the word of the Lord.

If you hadn't heard this story every year, it would be a rather strange one. Why did Jesus, who had been travelling by foot for the last hundred kilometers finally decide to hijack someone's donkey? Specifically demanding a 'donkey's colt', or a young untrained donkey, only to have his way obstructed by a crowd of people throwing garments and palm branches in his way? Why does this then cause the Jewish leaders to tell Jesus to rebuke his disciples, and when he refuses, and says that this worship is so important to the very grain of the universe that the very stones would 'cry out' if the disciples did not? Why then does this cause Jesus to weep over Jerusalem? Most importantly, what does this action mean for us today, and why should we remember it with so much fervour that we recreate the event with palms and all?

The most important thing that we need to recognize in the story of the Triumphal Entry, is that this is the moment when Jesus is officially announced as the coming Messiah, the true King of Israel. All of the expectation that was building up over his life is finally being released. The highly anticipated Messiah, the greater Son of David, has returned! Jesus no longer is trying to hide it, and if his disciples did not praise him, the very stones will cry out! The question though, is what kind of kingdom is Jesus bringing? Many, even today, still misunderstand what kingdom Jesus is entering into. Is Jesus coming to make Israel great again, as the disciples desire? What is his throne going to look like?

There is a curious tension in the story when we know what is coming directly after. Jesus is indeed "the Lord" as the owners of the colt were told by the disciples, and his disciples knew this and were excited at his finally doing something that they had been waiting for him to do. He is doing things that look like a king! Jesus comes with shouts of praise, but these same people a week later will turn on him. Their "hosanna" turns to "crucify him!" This is because they misunderstood the nature of his coming. They wanted a king on their own terms, not the true Lord of all.

At this point in Jesus' ministry, he had been misunderstood so much it is expected when you read the story. On the one side, his disciples are still thinking that he is coming to re-establish the Davidic kingdom as it was in the past, and they all wanted prime places in the cabinet. They wanted worldly power and wealth for themselves. And on the other hand, those currently in power recognized that Jesus was not on their team, and if they wanted to keep their power they had better stop him. The Pharisees in the crowd tell Jesus to stop them from announcing his kingdom. Nobody, it seems, really understood the spiritual nature of Christ's kingdom. Everyone wanted the Messiah on their terms. Most importantly, nobody saw their need for Christ to save them from their biggest enemy, not Rome, but their sin, themselves.

The question we must ask ourselves is, when we proclaim with praise that Jesus is Lord, that his Kingdom is eternal, what kingdom are we talking about? Are we like the disciples, imagining worldly glory for ourselves? Or are we willing to follow Christ to his throne, being lifted up on the cross. Are we willing to give up control to the true Lord, or will we be like the Pharisees in the story?

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We'll start today by looking a bit at the background of what Jesus is doing in the Triumphal entry, then we'll look at why he is so upset over Jerusalem, and last we'll finish with how we might be tempted to the same sin as Jesus' disciples and the pharisees.

So first, to understand what Jesus was doing in the Triumphal Entry it is essential to look at the Old Testament. Zechariah 9 gives a clear pronouncement about the Messiah's coming, and here it says,

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“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.
¹⁰I will take away the chariots from Ephraim
 and the warhorses from Jerusalem,
 and the battle bow will be broken.
 He will proclaim peace to the nations.
 His rule will extend from sea to sea
 and from the River to the ends of the earth.”

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Because Jesus is a king, he demands a colt that has never been used. In ancient times, a King's mount was to be used by him alone. They are not common things, but set apart. Jesus demanding these things, and calling himself “the Lord” gave his disciples the message they have wanted to hear since they started following him. Their expectation that he would free them from their enemies, who they thought to be the Romans, was starting to begin. But notice the aspects of the prophecy they don't see; that peace will come with broken bows and without chariots and warhorses. That this peaceful kingdom will cover the whole earth.

Luke says that the disciples then throw their garments on the ground, creating a covered pathway for the king. This exact same action is seen in 2Kgs.9:13, at the inauguration of Jehu (you might remember him, he was summoned by the prophet Elisha and cleansed Israel of Ahab and Jezebel, and became king). This shows that Jesus and the crowd both agree that he is a true king of Israel.

That Jesus is the coming Messiah, and the awaited king, is made most explicit in the way the disciples announce his arrival. They adapt Psalm 118:26, which says, “blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!” swapping out ‘he’ with ‘the king’. Psalm 118 was a Psalm that pilgrims would say as they entered Jerusalem, something they all likely would have done. Adding ‘the king’ shows how Jesus’ coming is fulfilling their purpose of their pilgrimages.

At this point some Pharisees tell Jesus to tell them to stop. This isn’t totally unexpected, as Jesus had been telling everyone to keep his miracles a secret up to this point, and not directly saying that he was the coming messiah as he didn’t want them to misunderstand what that meant. He knew that this moment would eventually lead to the cross.

Jesus though, knows that this time is inevitable. He is truly the messiah, and more, even if his disciples and the crowd didn’t know what that meant. Jesus says, “if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.” Here, Jesus seems to be quoting Habakkuk 2:11, where it says that stones will cry out from a wall when it is being destroyed in God’s judgement. This is a way of talking about how the city will be destroyed. His mentioning this is then made clearer in the way he weeps over Jerusalem.

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Jesus’ weeping over Jerusalem shows that this story is something of a tragedy. We are used to thinking of Good Friday as a tragedy, but maybe not Palm Sunday. Even though it might be fun to wave branches, and sing Hosanna, our story ends with Jesus’ weeping. Jesus’ followers also thought it was exciting to be there for the coming of the Messiah. Finally, all their hopes would be filled.

I think there is an interesting connection here to Jonah. Since we have the story of Jonah fresh in our minds, let’s remember why Jonah was so upset and what God was trying to teach him, and all Israel through him. Understanding God’s lesson to Jonah is key to why Jesus was so upset with the Jerusalem.

So, why didn’t God destroy Nineveh like he did Sodom? Because they repented. Why was Jonah so upset with God? Because Jonah wanted to see the Ninevites get destroyed, he wanted Israel to be the only apple of God’s eye. Jesus, like Jonah, comes to Jerusalem preaching repentance, but unlike Nineveh, Jerusalem does not repent. Jesus then weeps,

not like Jonah because they won't be destroyed, but because Jerusalem will be destroyed. Jerusalem will not be able to turn from the sin of Jonah, thinking that they are the only ones God cares about, thinking that their earthly kingdom is all that matters.

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Jesus says, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes." What is the peace that Jesus is talking about? This peace has two senses, both born out of a misunderstanding of what God's Kingdom is.

First, Jerusalem will continue to misunderstand God's kingdom in thinking that it is an earthly kingdom like David's, and not a spiritual kingdom that Christ announced. God had up until this point preserved Jerusalem as the place which Jesus' sacrifice must happen. But after Jesus death and resurrection the city no longer needs to be preserved, and so God allowed it to be destroyed by Rome. The Jewish leaders understood that the coming Kingdom would put them on top, just like before.

It was precisely this expectation that Jesus was seeking to avoid. He didn't want to make a big scene that would inevitably wind up in revolt against Rome before he was able to give his peaceful message of a Kingdom not of this world. In order for Jesus to not have a revolution start in his name, he had to go about proclaiming his kingdom as quietly as possible, that is, up until now, when he seems to feel that his end is at hand. The cross is coming soon, so he doesn't have to worry about a movement surrounding him and following what they want him to be rather than who he is and will make clear in his death and resurrection.

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Because of this misunderstanding Jerusalem will so set itself up against the Roman Empire and be destroyed. In AD 66, thirty years after Jesus' prophecy, the first wave of Jewish revolt took place seeking to free Judea from Roman rule under a false messiah. The Romans responded to this revolt with a long and brutal siege and eventually led to the death of thousands and the sacking of Jerusalem in AD 70. This, sadly, fulfills Jesus' prophecy. It is easy to see that had Jerusalem followed Jesus they would have been spared this horrible end. Jesus can see this, and thus he weeps over a city he has loved so much.

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Second, the Jewish leaders misunderstood what their ultimate peace is. That is peace with God that only comes through Christ's sacrifice. If they had understood this, Jerusalem would have been spared. Had Jerusalem followed Jesus, they would have not fought Rome, but evangelized it. They may have become martyrs in this, but they would not have died

needlessly at the hand of the Romans. Our sin leads to all kinds of enmity, not only between God, but also between each other.

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In our age we can also fall into many of the same temptations that the Jewish leaders did, that is, to try and set up God's kingdom for him. This is generally called "triumphalism," as in God has already triumphed over every enemy so there is a clear path forward. One Encyclopedia defines it as the church "irresistibly conquering throughout the centuries...seemingly more interested in upholding its own rights and privileges than in promoting the salvation of all." Christians that confuse this world with the world to come, and so place all their hopes for peace and security in this life, have a similar sin as both the Jewish leaders who feared Jesus taking away their power and Jesus' followers who thought Jesus was coming to give them power.

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We see this on both the right and the left. On the right we see Christians involved in culture wars, rallying support for their political causes with rhetoric about the evilness of their opposition and how if we don't act decisively, we will lose this culture. On the left we see it in confusing the mission of the church with their political causes. There seems to be a confusion here with our culture, our schools, our government, and the church, both the right and left.

Jesus did not command his followers to take control of the mechanisms of power and influence in this world, but to serve the world. Jesus himself came not to be served, but to serve (Mk.10:42-45). Jesus resolutely says that we should not expect success in this world, but brace ourselves for persecution and suffering (Mt.16:24-26). Jesus says that his kingdom is not of this world (Jn.17:14; 18:36), that we are pilgrims passing through this age (1Pet.2:11), and our ultimate citizenship is in heaven, not here (Phil.3:20).

That God wanted to set up a social gospel or for us to be primarily healthy and wealthy, would be news to the Apostles who all suffered greatly for their faith, as well as the three centuries of Christian history with constant persecution. This is what they all expected. The world's hatred for Christ is seen in its hatred for his followers. The same desire they had to crucify him—their blindness to their own sin, their hatred for God's law, their desire to take God's rightful rule away from him—still exists in their hearts. This culminates in persecution of Christians. There are more Christians being persecuted today than at any time in history.

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God's kingdom will come in glory when he comes again, but for now we wait in expectation. We accept our place as humble followers in a kingdom that looks weak in the eyes of the world. A kingdom that grows through a proclamation of a word that seems ignored by most. But it is in our weakness that he is strong. How ironic is it that when the church has the most worldly power it seems to be the most corrupt, but when it is being persecuted it seems to have the greatest effect?

It is not that we shouldn't be involved in politics, God desires our world to follow his way for their good! Or that our lives in the world are ultimately meaningless, God desires that we seek the good of our neighbour in every realm of life. But these should not be confused with the kingdom of God. When we do that, we are like the disciples who celebrated Jesus on his way to Jerusalem shouting "hosanna" and then turned their back on him when it didn't go their way shouting "crucify him!"

One day all God's people will say with Revelation 11:15, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever." But today is not that day. No, we are still in the place of announcing that day's coming. That is the place of the church today, to proclaim the coming of the Kingdom and the King. To bring the kingdom is something only Christ can do. We do not build the kingdom, we receive it. Let us receive it!