

Luke 19:28-44
“Christ’s Well-Wishers”
Palm Sunday, April 9, 2017
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Technically, Luke does not tell us that Lord actually *entered* Jerusalem, only what happened as he drew near to the city. But as the end of the chapter makes clear he did enter the city, the editors of the *ESV* are correct to entitle this paragraph “The Triumphal Entry.”

Text Comment

v.34 The odd instructions served to draw everyone’s attention to what was happening and to make it memorable. Everything happened just as Jesus said it would.

v.36 The verb translated “rode along” is the 10th occurrence of its use since 9:51, where we read that the Lord had “set his face to go to Jerusalem.” In other words, from that point on Luke was emphasizing the fact that the Lord was on his way to Jerusalem. This is the tenth and last use of this verb as he had now reached Jerusalem. The verb means “to walk” or “to travel”, not specifically “to ride,” but riding happened to be how he was traveling that day.

Spreading their cloaks on the road, together with the palm branches that Luke does not mention but the other Gospel writers do, made this an explicitly *triumphal* entry, royal honors being paid to the man riding the donkey colt.

v.37 The procession had become larger. Many Passover pilgrims were on that road on their way into Jerusalem after the Sabbath. Many people from Galilee who would have considered themselves in some sense followers of Jesus were in the procession. The several years of pent-up enthusiasm – stoked by the Lord’s breathtaking miracles – broke loose as they saw Jesus fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9. Remember, God’s people knew the Word of God in those days. They knew it by heart. They would have picked this up immediately. That text reads: “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” Surely this man *was* the Messiah, Israel’s long promised king. Imagine being a Jew that day, a member of a people who had waited long generations for this very day!

v.38 There it is: “King!” The people called him “the King.” The Pharisees and Sadducees were not pleased.

v.40 The Lord’s reply meant that his arrival in Jerusalem was the event to which the entire course of biblical prophecy and Israel’s history has been pointing. There was no way for him to make this moment less significant than it was.

v.44 As we learned at the beginning of the Gospel of, Luke in those passages usually read at Christmas time, God’s visitation of his people in Christ would lead either to their

salvation or to their judgment. If Jerusalem would not have Jesus as her savior – and she was not welcoming him as a savior from sin and death but as an earthly king who could give her victory over the Romans and renew her prosperity and status in the world – she must have him as her judge. [Caird, 217]

The spiritual blindness of the people, a reality Jesus had addressed many times before, their unwillingness to accept who Jesus was and why he had come into the world, was now irreversible. God's judgment must come and, of course, did come, in the total destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the finale of the ferocious Roman response to the Jewish rebellion that began in A.D. 66.

Today begins our commemoration of what Christians call Holy Week, the week in which salvation, eternal life came to pass for the human race. That week, which extends through the following Sunday, included the most terrible and the most wonderful days that ever were or ever shall be in the history of the world.

The four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – bear their own witness to the fact that the events of this week were the meaning and purpose of the Lord's coming into the world. Matthew, devotes twenty chapters to the entire course of the Savior's life up to this point, but eight chapters to the final seven days. Mark devotes nearly forty percent of his Gospel to the Passion Week. John devotes nearly half of his Gospel to this last week. Luke, the longest Gospel, devotes twenty percent of his space to the last week of the Lord's ministry, but Luke also devoted immense amounts of space to the anticipation of the Passion week, to the Lord's *progress toward Jerusalem over the last year of his ministry*, much more attention to that part of his ministry than is given by the other three Gospel writers, indeed almost another eight chapters.

The Church understood from the beginning that what happened in this final week was the reason for the Lord's coming into the world. You may have noticed this in reciting the Creed. The Lord's entire public ministry is passed over in silence. "I believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried." Nothing of his teaching, nothing of his miracles. As the Lord himself said in many different ways, he came to give his life a ransom for many. It was upon the events of this last week, supremely his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead, that our faith is founded and upon which rests our hope of eternal life.

So the Triumphal Entry takes its great importance from the fact that it was the first thing that happened in the most important few days in the history of the world. It was spring, probably a sunny and warm Sunday morning, as most spring mornings are in Jerusalem. Give wing to your imagination and see in your mind's eye the event as it unfolds: the noise of the ever-growing crowd, the enthusiasm, the shouts of "Hosanna!" the Lord Jesus coming along the road first up and then down the Mount of Olives – hard to see him through the crowds – hard to hear the clip-clop of the donkey's hooves on the paving stones over the din being made by the crowd of pilgrims.

What was happening here? To answer that question we must go back a year or so to a mountain top in Galilee where one night, in the presence of the inner circle of his twelve disciples – Peter, James, and John – the Lord was transfigured. That is, his divine glory was revealed; his disciples, saw him with the glory of God upon him. It was a transcendent and life-changing experience as may be indicated by the fact that both Peter and John, the two of those disciples who lived to write books of the New Testament, refer to it. Peter would later write that he had been an “eyewitness of his majesty” when together with him on the holy mountain (2 Pet. 1:16-18). Moses and Elijah also appeared to Jesus that night and spoke to him about his impending death. Out of that experience, the Gospel writers tell us, came a changed Jesus. We read that from that night he “set his face toward Jerusalem.” He began for the first time to speak more frequently and openly about what was to happen to him: that he would fall into the hands of the religious leadership in Jerusalem, be put to death by the Romans, and then rise to life on the third day. As often as he told his disciples about this, they neither believed nor understood what he was saying. They could see triumph in his future, not ignominious defeat; not for the man whose divine power they were witnessing day after day.

Throughout that final year of ministry, the Lord made slow and intermittent progress southward from Galilee to Judea and Jerusalem. Along the way he took steps that couldn’t help but advertise his coming and provoke his enemies among the religious leadership, already fulminating against him; jealous as they were of his popularity, infuriated as they were by his criticism of their teaching and their way of life, and concerned as they were not to lose their place of leadership among the people. For example, he sent out 72 of his disciples on a preaching tour, entrusting them with power to cast out demons and heal the sick. This created an immense stir, not least because it so clearly indicated that the Lord’s movement was growing, his influence becoming greater by the day. It was a small country. What was happening in Galilee, Samaria, and in the Trans-Jordan would have been reported in Jerusalem a mere day or two later. And his enemies were keeping a close watch.

As the year drew to a close and Passover approached the Lord arrived in the vicinity of Jerusalem. In the few weeks before Passover he performed two of his most stunning miracles. The first was at Jericho where, on a road crammed with Passover pilgrims making their way to Jerusalem, he granted sight to the blind beggar Bartimaeus. Within hours the news would have been spreading through the capital. Then some days later, in Bethany, just two miles from Jerusalem, Jesus raised his friend Lazarus from the dead. This too was done in the presence of many witnesses and we know the religious leadership heard what had happened virtually immediately. That was the last straw for the leaders of the two principal parties in the Sanhedrin, the Jewish governing council, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. It is not at all unlikely that one or more of their members had witnessed the miracle. But rather than convincing them that Jesus was in fact the Messiah, sent from God, it settled them in their conviction that Jesus had to be destroyed. They could not compete with him for the popularity of the people if he continued to wield such power and were they to acknowledge him as a prophet and as the man sent from God, they would have to admit how wrong they had been and abandon their entire religious program, something they were unwilling to do. Such is the human heart!

After that great miracle, the Lord retired from public view for a few days. But that only served to heighten the people’s anticipation to a fever pitch. They knew Jesus was somewhere nearby.

Many were now convinced he was the Messiah, the long-promised redeemer of Israel. They may not have understood his true mission – thinking him more a military and political figure than a savior from sin and death – but they were in raptures that after centuries of waiting he had finally appeared!

Passover was the most patriotic time of year for the Jews. Pilgrims had come from all over the world to be present for the feast. At Passover the ordinary population of Jerusalem – 30,000 to 50,000 (a very sizeable city in those days) – would swell to upwards of 150,000. Those of you who have been the Middle East can imagine the crowded bazaars, the narrow streets jammed with people, home and dinner tables full with friends and relatives from afar, except, of course, for those who took advantage of Airbnb to rent out their homes for exorbitant sums during the holiday! The name of Jesus was on everyone’s lips. What would he do? What would the religious leadership do? What would the Romans do? They would talk of his miracles, of his teaching and ask, “How could anyone do such things and *not* be the Messiah?”

Our Savior kept that Sabbath Day as he had always done. He spent it with the Twelve and his good friends Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. Imagine the conversation around *that* dinner table! Then the next morning, the first day of the Jewish week, in the company of his disciples and a growing crowd of followers – his whereabouts could hardly have been kept a complete secret – the Lord left Bethany and made his way up the western slope of the Mount of Olives. He came to a village called Bethphage. The strange instructions he gave his disciples regarding the donkey were bound to create still more interest, all the more when the disciples returned to say that everything had happened precisely as the master had predicted.

As the party crested the summit of the Mount of Olives and began to descend toward the city – anyone who has stood on the Mount of Olives and looked across the Kidron Valley to the city of Jerusalem knows how impressive that sight must have been, with the temple, as King Herod had rebuilt and refurbished it, gleaming in the sun and dominating one’s view – I say, as the party began to descend the crowd began to grow larger. Sunday would have been the day for many pilgrims to complete their journey to the capital. What is more, the news of Jesus’ approach no doubt electrified the capital and many folk would have come out of the city to catch a sight of him, if not welcome him as a king. And, as happens in such situations, as the other Gospels tell us, in the excitement someone cried out “Hosanna,” one of those OT exclamations of praise, which in Psalm 118:25 is followed by “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” And soon the same cry was on everyone’s lips. “Hosanna!” We’ve witnessed huge crowds in a frenzy shouting or chanting many such things in modern history: from “Heil Hitler” to “Allahu Akbar” to “Viva la Revolucion” and so on. That day it was “Hosanna, Blessed is the King!” So it is not difficult for a citizen of our time to imagine the scene, the crowd shouting, the disciples beaming and laughing as their hero was being worshipped by the crowds as the procession made its way toward the gate of the city.

Surely Jesus himself must have found the adulation of the crowd, their enthusiastic welcome immensely satisfying, especially after all the criticism and the opposition he had suffered through the last three years. But, in fact, it was not so. Instead we read that the sight of the city brought tears to his eyes. He knew only too well that he was being worshipped for all the wrong reasons.

He knew what was coming for Jerusalem and for his people. Within in forty years there would be nothing left of temple or city and the Jewish nation would be no more.

The carping criticism of the Pharisees, mentioned in v. 40, was a reminder that neither they nor the people in general accepted who he was or what he had come to do. John tells us (12:16) that even the Lord's disciples did not understand what was happening and wouldn't until after the resurrection. Like human beings everywhere and at all times, they still imagined their real problems to be something else: political marginalization, economic diminishment, social alienation, and so on. They were not chiefly worried about the judgment of God or the forgiveness of their sins. Comparatively few people ever are. The principle reason people do not embrace the gospel of Christ is because they don't imagine that they need what the gospel provides. They want other things. So it was that day outside Jerusalem. No one supposed that their urgent need was for a redeemer to die for their sins and so reconcile them to God. Luke tells us what they wanted from Jesus: more of his mighty works!

And so the remark of the Lord we find in v. 41. What they needed was peace with God, a peace they were not seeking because they glibly assumed that they already had that *because they were Jews*, the people of God. Most people today who glibly assume that they don't need God's forgiveness have less reason to think that than they did! But what they needed and what all men and women need was not victory in battle, not miracles of healing, not deliverance from political oppression, but forgiveness from God and only a Redeemer who was both God and man could provide *that!*

Jesus knew their mind perfectly well. He had been dealing with that mind for three years. Like a salesman whose florid compliments do nothing to raise your self-esteem, the praises of the crowd that were rolling over him that day were no encouragement at all. With his acute foresight he could see Jerusalem lying in ruins before him as it would be when the Romans were finished with it forty years later.

He also realized that the manner of his entering the city was virtually a gauntlet thrown at the feet of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Indeed, he had no other intention but that it should provoke a response from them. He entered the city, not at the crack of dawn when few would be awake, not in the darkness of evening when no one would see, but in daylight at a time when the road was crowded with pilgrims. He came astride a donkey, one never before ridden, which according to the imagery, history, and prophecy of the OT made this procession a royal procession, the public announcement that Jesus of Nazareth was the King of the Jews. That is why the Lord drew special attention to the arrangements to secure a donkey colt to ride on. He wanted everyone to pay attention to *the way* in which he was to enter Jerusalem. And the crowd did not miss it. They knew their Bible. They behaved as if they were welcoming a king. And, to the exasperation of the Pharisees, Jesus accepted their attribution of royalty to him.

He had not done this for much of the three previous years. During that time Jesus had gone out of his way to avoid such a direct assertion of his messianic kingship. Over and over again he told people he had healed, sometimes healed in the most spectacular fashion, to say nothing about it to anyone. That was likely! He told his disciples pointblank that they were to tell no one that he was the Messiah. Why? Because he was not yet ready to provoke the final confrontation with the

religious authorities. He would lay his life down, but on his own terms and only when the time to do so had arrived. *Well, the time had come.* The need for restraint had passed. What we see Jesus doing here is precipitating the crisis that would lead to his death a few days later. He was already under a ban. The chief priests and elders had for some time been plotting to kill him. He knew that. He had friends in the Sanhedrin who were telling him that. The people had been afraid to be public in their enthusiasm about Jesus *precisely because they feared the retribution of the religious leadership.* They knew very well how opposed to Jesus the priests and elders were. So in allowing the crowd to break loose in wild enthusiasm at his approach to Jerusalem, Jesus was as much as daring the authorities to do something about him. He had come to die for our sins and now it was time to do it. And if the triumphal entry was not enough, the Lord's teaching in the temple courts over the next several days, his stoking the popular enthusiasm, guaranteed a violent reaction. As he once said, no one would take his life from him; he would lay it down of his own accord.

It is often said that these same people who greeted him wildly on Palm Sunday would be crying for his execution the following Friday morning. I have thought that myself. But I think that is not in fact the case. I just read a study that I think convincingly demonstrates it not to have been the case. The religious authorities arrested Jesus late Thursday night precisely to prevent the people from knowing what they were doing. Jesus was still very popular. They feared the reaction of the people. The "crowd" that was present at his trial before Pilate and that clamored for his execution was almost certainly composed of people the religious leaders had called together for the purpose. In fact there was no public square, no open space in the area of Pilate's palace sufficiently large to hold a sizeable number of people who might have gathered spontaneously if, in fact, the news had filtered through the city that Jesus was now on trial. The people who accompanied Jesus into Jerusalem were probably not at his trial and in many cases, most cases, probably not even aware that it was taking place until it was over. This may account for the large numbers of people – thousands of folk with a residual enthusiasm for Jesus – who upon learning of his resurrection became believers in him and followers of him.

The crowd that welcomed Jesus with such enthusiasm on that long ago Sunday morning certainly did not understand who he was or what he had come to do, but with a true instinct they realized that he was the king, that nothing else could explain his remarkable life, his supernatural power, and his teaching, all which so transcended what they had ever seen or known before. They rightly realized that he could do for them what no one else could do. We should not forget that just a few weeks later thousands upon thousands were streaming into the fledgling church precisely because they had come to realize precisely *who he actually was* and *what he had actually come to do* and had done.

We cannot celebrate Palm Sunday, the events that led up to it and the events that followed, without realizing that Jesus Christ, the man on the donkey, the man the crowds were hailing as he rode by with tear-stained cheeks, the king on the way to his own death, that this person stands at the center of human life, is the source of eternal salvation for all who trust in him, that he divides the saved from the lost, and that he alone can make up all the longings of the human heart. His personal history is the proof of that, as is the witness born to him in the New Testament by those who knew him, who witnessed these events with their own eyes, and who saw him and received their commission from him *after* his resurrection the following Sunday.

Jesus himself said that he was “the way, the truth, and the life.” An astonishing assertion to be made anyone, to be sure, but not so astonishing if he was, indeed, the Son of God, if he came into the world precisely to atone for the sins of his people, and if, after his death on the cross, he rose to new and everlasting life on the third day.

What we see here are people who want things and think Jesus could give them what they wanted. Their enthusiasm was the result of their longings and their hope that he could fulfill those longings. What do *you* want? What would make *your* life complete? Well, let me tell you what you *should* want! You should want those things that in their very nature bring with them everything any human being could ever want. You should want peace with God, you should want a clean conscience, you should want the power to live a truly good and worthy life, you should want to be genuinely useful to other people, you should want to be happy for the best reasons, and you should want the hope of everlasting life. The world can't give you a single one of those things. Nor can another human being. Jesus Christ alone can give you such things. He came into the world in order to give you such things.

That is why in the history of the Gospels Jesus provoked either hatred or adoration. The crowd here adored him; the Pharisees hated him and planned to kill him. What we don't find is mild-approval. That is because Jesus Christ compels you to choose. His claims are such that, if true, he is the meaning of human life; all other human faiths and programs are contradicted and objectively disproved! If that weren't true why would people hate him so much? Why would they not simply ignore him and forget him? Because he threatened everything they wanted to believe; their very way of life. People who can *only claim* to work miracles never get the kind of following Jesus got. He was a threat precisely because there was so much about him that had convinced multitudes of former skeptics that he really had been sent by God to give them what they needed. His death certainly gave them pause, but the news of his resurrection put paid to their doubts. His enemies tried to wipe out the new movement and failed, as every effort to wipe out his influence ever since has failed.

Why? Because a man who knew the future, who willingly went to certain death because his death was the price of salvation for the human race, and a man died only to rise again, really is and must be “the King who comes in the name of the Lord.”