

A Victory Parade

Our Gospel reading is Matthew 21:1-11, Jesus' enacted parable, full of symbolism to convey his claim to be the Messiah. Knowing this was the last week of his mortal life on earth, and that the purpose of his incarnation would be fulfilled through his looming cross and resurrection, Jesus intentionally set the wheels in motion for his arrest. He knew his entry into the city as the prophesied King of Peace would incite, not only praise, but also the zeal of his enemies to bring about his execution. Till this time, Jesus had avoided the open declaration of his messiah-ship, realizing that the fervor of the crowd was for a political kingdom with immediate fulfillment. I read:

When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anyone says anything to you, just say this, 'The Lord needs them.' And he will send them immediately."⁴ This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

*⁵ "Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey."*

⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷ they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸ A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,

"Hosanna to the Son of David!

*Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!
Hosanna in the highest heaven!"*

¹⁰ When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, "Who is this?" ¹¹ The crowds were saying, "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee."

The triumphal entry of Christ into Jerusalem created no small stir. The whole city was shaken, as with an earthquake. Our English word "seismic," the effect of an earthquake, is based on the Greek in this verse.

"Everybody loves a parade," is a well-known saying and truism, whether they be national celebrations of military victories or the celebrations of the local team's championship, such as the million plus in Chicago at the end of the World's Series. This past week, the University of North Carolina's basketball team was given a huge victory parade to celebrate their winning the NCAA championship. Parades are great celebrations, but in order for them to be repeated the following year, the team has to once again win the championship. Some who celebrate one year might boo the team the following year. A lot of people in the parade that welcomed Jesus would be the very ones who would turn against him and six days later cry, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" (27:22).

A large crowd was virtually assured for the triumphal entry of Christ. Between two and three million pilgrims had come to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration.

Some of those who joined in this procession of Jesus into the city were sincerely giving him praise and welcoming him to the City of David as the true Messiah. Many were no doubt joining the parade merely for the excitement. Others were simply indifferent spectators. Such demonstrations were not new, nor significant to the Roman authorities, who were interested only if it should get out of control. They would hardly have thought of Jesus' entrance as a threat. To them, the sight of a peasant man riding on a donkey, receiving such praise would have been ludicrous, compared to the impressive entrances they had seen by their victorious generals, governors and kings.

But there were those who were disturbed by Jesus' triumphal entry. Religious scholars understood the messianic symbolism Jesus was conveying. They likely thought, as they say Jesus entering on the young donkey colt, the prophecy of Zechariah (9:9), quoted in our text. In this triumphal entry, King Jesus was acting a live parable, presenting a clear picture that he indeed is the long-expected Messiah, the one who has come to save his people. No longer is Jesus' identity to be kept to a select few, but now it is time for the world to know that he is King of kings and Lord of lords and that he has come to bring salvation to all who will believe.

Entering the city from the Mount of Olives, Jesus announced to the world his kingship; and receiving the praise of the worshipers along the route into the city and to the temple, Jesus shows the world that he is worthy of all worship and honor as the Son of God (Zech. 9:9). Entering the city as did King David, following victory over Absalom's rebellion, Jesus reveals himself to be the King of Peace (2 Sam.19), who through his reign overcomes the power of our sin and rebellion. Jesus offers himself and his kingdom reign for all who will repent and follow him (4:17).

In his triumphal entry, Jesus enacted the Parable of the Wedding Banquet by going into "the street corners" to invite whoever will to come to his saving grace (22:9f). In the parable, the wedding hall was filled with guests, just as the streets of Jerusalem were filled with those singing Jesus' praises. Many failed to understand the meaning of this triumphal procession. They knew he was some kind of a prophet and miracle worker, but they had no spiritual insight. So the whole city, which was astir and even shaken by this demonstration, was asking, "Who is this?" (10). The crowd knew his name was Jesus and he was a prophet from Nazareth and that he had a group of followers and had done some amazing things, but that's about all they knew.

What's amazing is the transition from this adulation and praise of Jesus on what is now known as Palm Sunday to the crucifixion of Jesus on that very Friday. No doubt there were some who in the crowd shouted "Hosanna to the Son of David!" which means "Save now!" and had become an expression of worshipful praise, who later cried "Crucify him!" (27:22f). All that these superficial worshipers could think of was how Jesus could benefit their material lives and immediate wellbeing. They failed to see that Jesus' kingdom is not of this world (Jn. 18:36).

We all know that public opinion changes quickly, particularly when our expectations aren't being met. Human leaders and their governments, even at their very best, never satisfy the desires and meet the needs of all of the people all of the time. No doubt there were those in the crowd on this first Palm Sunday who had hopes that

this Messiah named Jesus might be the one to reverse their fortunes and meet their expectations.

There are plenty of church-going Christians who'll worship and praise Jesus when they think it's to their advantage to do so, but their opinions and loyalties are liable to change quickly when their expectations aren't being met. There're a lot of "consumer Christians" who demand immediate customer satisfaction. If their church "investment" doesn't pay immediate benefits, they soon "want their money back" and will go elsewhere, like the layman who sued his church for his back tithe, saying God didn't bless him like the preacher promised. Such people have a superficial view of Jesus and have no insight into following Jesus in the way of the cross.

The Romans thought this whole demonstration of a so-called king riding a donkey was ludicrous. To them a real king and hero would ride a white horse and enter with his powerful army behind him. And there are so-called Christians who want 'power evangelism,' *salvation* which comes riding on a white horse to chase all their troubles away. They want to hear a "gospel" which promotes health and wealth, and they expect a religion that delivers on its promises to make life better.

Most of the people knew about Jesus, the miracle-working prophet from Nazareth. But this question was more like, "Just who is this man who commands such excitement?" His presence in the city was disturbing. And as Jesus enters Jerusalem, the response to him is either reception or rejection, just as is true today. Many did welcome Jesus, and expressed their praise and, in quoting from the psalm, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord" (9, & Ps.118:26). Some in the crowd of worshipers had begun to follow Jesus as Lord, even though most of them failed to understand the nature of his kingdom and rule. They, as we must do, acknowledged the authority of Jesus as King, even though he had none of the earthly trappings of kingship. Yet they submitted to his kingly authority.

These who received Jesus as their Lord accepted him as a humble servant King whose destiny was the cross. And although most didn't understand the necessity of the cross until after his death and resurrection, these believers were willing to receive him on his terms and were willing to submit to his authority as king. This is the only way to respond to Jesus when he comes to us—to receive him on his terms. We too must accept what we cannot understand and be willing for him to be our Lord and Savior, submitting to his will for us. His will is that we come after him and take up our cross and follow him (10:38; 16:24), whatever the cost to us (10:32).

No doubt there were some in this crowd of worshipers who later, in the courtroom of Governor Pilate, would cry, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" (27:22f). In the environment of worship, with the popular support of the crowd, they were comfortable in joining with their lips the words and songs of praise. But Jesus noted that such "worshipers" are in fact hypocrites. He quoted Isaiah, who noted that such people "honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Matt. 15:7f & Is. 29:13).

Those who rejected Jesus were not all regarded as his enemies. Most of the people probably simply ignored him, and possibly didn't join the parade. Although the city was stirred with excitement, most of the people probably dismissed him as just another zealous leader of an illegal movement. Yet because Jesus came into the

city as a king, he couldn't be ignored, and everyone had to make the choice of either acknowledging him for who he claimed to be or of rejecting his claims.

And the fact that Jesus came into the world brings a great, unavoidable divide between those who receive him and those who reject him, either willfully or by neglect. It's all rejection, just the same. Jesus brings his judgment simply by his presence. Even churches have to decide whether to receive Jesus as Lord of our worship, service and fellowship or we'll relegate him to being a relic from the past while we continue church activities with "business as usual."

In Luke's account of this triumphal entry, we see closer into the heart of Jesus, who looked down upon the city from the top of the Mount of Olives:

¹As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, ⁴² saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. (Lk. 19:41f). Jesus entered the city as the Prince of Peace, the King of the Kingdom of Peace through God's salvation. Jesus spoke then of the devastation that was coming upon the City of Jerusalem. In AD 70, the Roman army would overrun the city and bring death and destruction to many of its inhabitants. Barclay notes that in AD 70 "the city was so devastated that a plough was drawn across the midst of it." Jesus' heart was broken as he saw those who rejected him as facing an immediate and everlasting judgment.

Jesus still comes to us, "gentle and riding on a donkey" (5). He comes to seek and to save the lost and this is still a day of opportunity to receive him. He continues to come to us gently. But Jesus wept because he knew his Second Coming would be far different from his first one. The first coming introduced a period of amnesty and grace, during which the lost may come to faith and receive and follow the gentle Savior of the cross. CS Lewis' Aslan, the Lion King, accurately represents a king who is gentle and loving to those who trust him, but also is to be feared by his enemies. Jesus still gently rides the donkey, but as we read in Revelation, he'll return to earth riding a white war horse and wielding a sword and an iron scepter (Rev. 19:11-16). How we respond to the first coming of the King will determine how he responds to us in his Second Coming.

The first entry of Jesus was in some ways not triumphant but rather tragic. He would be turned upon by many in this crowd of worshipers and the religious leaders would conspire for his arrest, trial and crucifixion later that same week. But God turned what appeared to be a tragedy into his great triumph, the triumph of the cross and the resurrection. And Jesus comes to us in his lowliness and as our Servant King, bringing us his great salvation. I hope we'll be stirred to ask this all-important question asked by the crowd upon his parade into the city: "Who is this?" (10) Who is Jesus to you? If you have received him as your Lord and King of your life, then your praise will have meaning and joy, and you have reason to celebrate on this Palm Sunday. You have received him in his first coming and now you are looking forward to his glorious Second Coming as your triumphant yet loving Lion King.

Maybe someday we'll be able to celebrate the victory of our local Badgers, Packers, Brewers, or whomever, but as kingdom-of-God citizens, we can look forward to an unrivaled victory parade, led by our Lion King Jesus, who will reign in perfect love, peace and justice for all in his everlasting kingdom.

