

Scripture Reading for Palm Sunday – 14th April 2019

Luke 19:28-40 (NIV)

²⁸ 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.”

Sermon: Two Processions and Two Responses

What is your reaction when you see a parade going by? Are you curious? Do you instinctively want to join in? Or are you too busy with your own agenda that you’re desperately wanting to find a way to avoid the crowds? I suspect much depends on our age; if you’re a child, you would be curious and you’ll be dragging your parents to get a good view of what’s going on. Even if you are older, you might like to at least know what is the reason for the parade. If it is something inspirational, like a march in support of a worthy cause, you might stand for a while and cheer them on. But I would suggest that it would have to be something very special for you to abandon your plans and spontaneously join in with the celebrations.

There were *two* processions entering Jerusalem that Passover week, so depending on timing and your location, you could have had a choice in either witnessing or participating in one or both of those parades. One would have come from the West with all the glory of imperial power: horses, chariots, and gleaming armour. This would be Pontius Pilate and a Roman cohort coming to Jerusalem at the beginning of Passover week to make sure nothing got out of hand. Political unrest and insurrection were in the air because Passover was an emotive Jewish festival when people remembered how God delivered them from their enemies in the past. The second procession came from the East and that

would be Jesus with his entourage of many followers¹ who had travelled the 25 km from Jericho. It is, literally, a long *uphill* journey from Jericho² to Jerusalem. It was near Jericho, so Luke tells us, that a persistent man, who happened to be blind, cried out to Jesus using a *royal* title, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”³ And Jesus stopped and healed him.⁴ It was in Jericho that Jesus met the chief tax-collector, Zacchaeus, and invited himself for dinner!⁵ Jesus blessed and honoured Zacchaeus, saying, “Today salvation has come to this house,”⁶ and then added a summary of his mission, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”⁷ These are the kind of people who were accompanying Jesus to Jerusalem. Two very different kinds of parades, one made up of military “winners” and the other of society’s outcasts and “losers.” And both likely watched by representatives of Jerusalem’s religious elite. Which procession would you like to join?

There was *nothing* spontaneous about Jesus coming to Jerusalem at Passover season.⁸ Luke has been narrating this journey toward Jerusalem for 10 whole chapters!⁹ This was to be the climax of the Jesus story, of his public career and his vocation. It was a very courageous thing to do - or perhaps foolish, depending on your point of view. Luke tells us earlier that some Pharisees had warned Jesus to “Watch out because Herod wants to kill you.”¹⁰ Jesus responds, “Go tell that fox, ‘I will keep on driving out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.’” Jesus continues, “In any case, I must press on today and tomorrow and the next day—for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem. . . I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”¹¹ Jesus knew well enough what lay ahead, yet he did not avoid it but met it head on.¹² He had been teaching about the kingdom of God and demonstrating its arrival through his miracles, and now he was about to provocatively enter Jerusalem as a king. Are we sure we want to join his procession?

Not only was the arrival of Jesus in Jerusalem deliberately timed to coincide with Passover Week, but Luke mentions that the journey passed through the Mount of Olives. We need to appreciate this subtle detail in the light of Old Testament expectations. There was a prophetic expectation that the Messiah’s arrival was imminent when he stood on the Mount of Olives.¹³ That same prophet, Zechariah, proclaimed: “Rejoice greatly, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and

¹ See Luke 19:37. In Luke’s gospel there is no ovation from the general crowds (Mark 11:8; Matt 21:9) or those who have gathered because of reports of the raising of Lazarus (John 12:12).

² Jericho is just above the Dead Sea, which itself is below sea level.

³ Luke 18:36-37. Theologians have long recognised that, in the Synoptic Gospels, the Old Testament images of *priest* and *king* have been used to describe the significance of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

⁴ Luke 18:35-43.

⁵ Luke 19:1-10.

⁶ Luke 19:9.

⁷ Luke 19:10. After that, Luke tells us: “Jesus went on to tell them a parable, because he was near Jerusalem and the people thought that *the kingdom of God was going to appear at once*” (Luke 19:11). Pilate seems to have had cause for concern.

⁸ Both the *location* and the *occasion* are full of symbolism of salvation and rescue.

⁹ Luke 9:51–19:27. Note in 9:51 a reference to forward *planning* for the journey ahead; did his also occur in 19:30-31?

¹⁰ Luke 13:31. See also John 11:55-57.

¹¹ Luke 13:32-35. See also Jesus’ lament over (and judgement of) Jerusalem in Luke 19: 41-46.

¹² This clearly does not require divine foreknowledge, rather an awareness of Jewish history.

¹³ Zech 14:4 - see also Luke 19:11 to provide added context.

victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”¹⁴ Consequently, when Jesus tells two of his disciples to go into the village ahead and find the colt that hasn’t been ridden,¹⁵ it is a proclamation that the king is coming! Even the placing of cloaks on the colt’s back alludes to kingship!¹⁶ Incidentally, Luke relates this story as if Jesus were not just a *king*, but also a *prophet* who had divine foreknowledge that the donkey and colt would be there. That may be the case; however, this is not the first time Jesus had visited Bethany and all this could have been pre-planned by Jesus for this occasion with “the Lord has need of it”¹⁷ being the password! Remember too that Jesus had *walked* for several years, so it is strange that he would suddenly mount an animal of any kind for the last kilometre or two! This is clearly a symbolic action. The mention of the Mount of Olives, and Jesus subsequently riding a donkey into Jerusalem, is making a bold royal claim.

What happens next? A whole crowd of Jesus-followers lead the way toward Jerusalem praising God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen, saying: “Blessed is the *king* who comes in the name of the Lord!”¹⁸ That first phrase is Luke’s adaptation of Psalm 118:26 and was in our *Call to Worship* today. This was the song that pilgrims *always* sang on the way to Jerusalem, a song of victory and praise to God, the one who defeats all their enemies and establishes his kingdom.¹⁹ This king would fulfil the people’s hopes and bring peace to earth from heaven itself. And speaking of peace and of heaven, the second phrase Luke says they sang was, “Peace in heaven and glory in the highest.”²⁰ This echoes the beginning of Luke where the angels give their message to the shepherds concerning the newly born Messiah, followed by the angels praising God, saying: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”²¹ Luke is a master story-teller stressing aspects that all point to Jesus’ *identity*. And we are mesmerised by this dramatic scene and ask, “What happens next?”

There’s a reaction! Some pharisees tell Jesus to “Rebuke his disciples,”²² presumably as they were proclaiming Christ as king. We are not told explicitly why; they could be fearing repercussions from the Romans, or, perhaps showing concern for his own safety,²³ or they were simply registering their own disagreement or disbelief. According to Luke, Jesus responds by saying, “If they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”²⁴ Yet even this is provocative, as it is a prophetic quote of judgement on Jerusalem.²⁵ And

¹⁴ Zech 9:9.

¹⁵ Luke 19:30. It is not uncommon that, for sacred purposes, animals were used that had not been previously employed in any other service – see 1 Sam 6:7; see also Luke 23:53.

¹⁶ 2 Kings 9:13.

¹⁷ Luke 19:31b,34. It seems strange to use an animal that had not been ‘broken in’ for a noisy parade into Jerusalem; it’s hardly ideal training ground! Hence one should also see the Old Testament connections, such as: Gen 49:10–11; Zech 9:9; 1 Kings 1:33–37.

¹⁸ Luke 19:37-38. Note Luke *explicitly* adds the word “king” (instead of “the one”) in Ps 118:26. Note that Luke *doesn’t* mention “hosannas” or palm branches being cut from the trees!

¹⁹ According to Luke 20:17, Jesus himself quotes from that psalm in one of his later debates in Jerusalem.

²⁰ Luke 19:38b.

²¹ Luke 2:8-15.

²² Luke 19:39. Note that only “some” (not all) pharisees rebuke Jesus.

²³ See Luke 13:31.

²⁴ Luke 19:40. See also Luke 3:8b. (There is also the Hebrew pun or wordplay between “stone” and “son.”)

²⁵ Hab 2:11. This also needs to be seen in the context of John the Baptist’s ministry (Luke 3:1-18) and Jesus’ own prophetic words (and lament) in Luke 19:41-44, and judgment in Luke 19:45-46.

from Jesus' point-of-view, this celebration *is* most appropriate because he is coming to bring God's salvation or rescue, just as God did at the original Passover in Egypt all those centuries ago.

There were, then, *two processions*; one by Pilate and his Roman cohort with the goal of *enforcing* the Roman peace [*pax romana*], and that of Jesus who not only *came* in peace; he came to *bring* peace. Both processions would have stirred emotions. And concerning the Jesus procession, there were *two responses*; one that *affirmed Christ as king* and one that *objected* to that claim.²⁶ Where do we stand?

In conclusion, I have two points to make and two questions to ask of us today. First, consider an honest doubter for a moment. Might this Jesus truly be the hope of Israel who would deliver them from their oppressors? Might this be the long-awaited Messiah who would usher in the blessing of 'the age to come' and cause the return of all of God's children who had been scattered abroad? While all Jews could appreciate the potent symbolism of Jesus coming on a donkey from the Mount of Olives, the doubter may be right to be cautious when one takes a closer look at those followers of Jesus. They were a rag-bag bunch of the society's outcast: of tax collectors, Samaritans, prostitutes, the disabled, and those from whom demons had been exorcised. Jesus was the king of the oppressed and suffering, the friend of sinners. He shared their hardships, relieved their suffering and accepted them when others deemed as outsiders. Do we really want to throw our cloaks in with that lot? Are we going to join in the procession and sing a song of praise, or are we going to be sideline grumblers?

Second, zoom back for a moment because Luke sets up the events of this particular Passover week by telling us the mindset of many of the followers of Jesus. As they approached to Jerusalem, Luke says: "The people thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear *at once*."²⁷ And after Passover, they left to go home crushed as they "had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel."²⁸ Their hopes had been raised and were dashed, once again by the oppressive Romans. Things just didn't work out as they had anticipated. In every age, it can be very hard to believe God is at work in history when events don't turn out as *we* expect. Yet what was the key issue here? Luke's narrative goes to explain that God *was* about to do something powerful and wonderful, but the disciples were looking for a different *kind* of king.²⁹ Their imaginations were too limited and God had a radically different way. This is always the danger when *we* attempt to chart the course for God to follow! It is too easy for us to project false images of the Lord we worship *or* to make for ourselves a king in our own image whom we can honour. The story of Christ's very public entry into Jerusalem forces us consider *who* is that we are following and *what* kind of king do we think he is?

Just as the parables of Jesus have a twist at the end, so we must anticipate this triumphal entry will have a surprising ending. Jesus knows what will eventually happen; so does Luke and his readers - and so do we. Regardless of the busyness of life, be curious about this parade; don't let it pass you by, instead, join in. Let us pray.

²⁶ Even though *all* the other gospel writers make it *very* clear that Jesus is like no other earthly king!

²⁷ Luke 19:11.

²⁸ Luke 24:21. (This occurs prior to the resurrection; they would have left after the Sabbath following the crucifixion.)

²⁹ Re-read Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55). Moreover, following Luke's logic, *if* the provision of the colt was divinely orchestrated, as Luke implies, then surely God must *still* be at work in the subsequent events of the week!