

Welcoming the King

(The Gospel According to Luke, Part VI)

First Christian Church, Hamilton, Illinois — April 9, 2017 (Palm Sunday)

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Luke 19:29-48 ESV

When he drew near to Bethphage and Bethany, at the mount that is called Olivet, he sent two of the disciples, saying, "Go into the village in front of you, where on entering you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever yet sat. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' you shall say this: 'The Lord has need of it.'"

So those who were sent went away and found it just as he had told them. And as they were untying the colt, its owners said to them, "Why are you untying the colt?" And they said, "The Lord has need of it." And they brought it to Jesus, and throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it.

And as he rode along, they spread their cloaks on the road. As he was drawing near—already on the way down the Mount of Olives — the whole multitude of his disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen, saying, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"

And some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out."

And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, "Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation."

And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold, saying to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be a house of prayer,' but you have made it a den of robbers." And he was teaching daily in the temple. The chief priests and the scribes and the principal men of the people were seeking to destroy him, but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were hanging on his words.

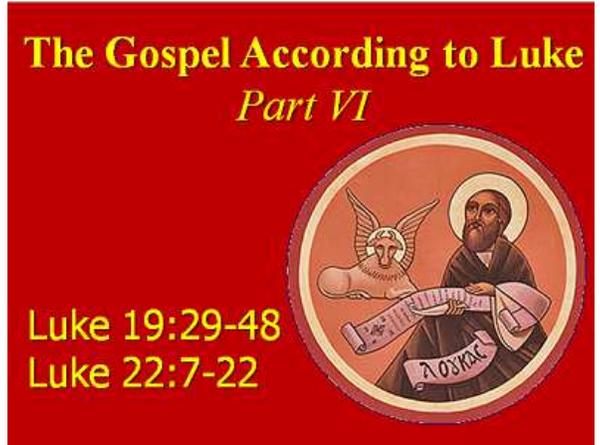
Luke 22:7-22 ESV

Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and prepare the Passover for us, that we may eat it."

They said to him, "Where will you have us prepare it?" He said to them, "Behold, when you have entered the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him into the house that he enters and tell the master of the house, 'The Teacher says to you, Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' And he will show you a large upper room furnished; prepare it there." And they went and found it just as he had told them, and they prepared the Passover.

And when the hour came, he reclined at table, and the apostles with him. And he said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, "Take this, and divide it among yourselves. For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes."

And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. But behold, the hand of him who betrays me is with me on the table. For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed!"



Today, on Palm Sunday, we're continuing to follow Jesus through the history supplied by the Gospel author Luke. To begin with, let's call attention to the symbol we've been using during this series to identify our source. Each of the four Gospels has traditionally been represented by a symbol — the winged man for Matthew, the winged lion for Mark, the winged ox for Luke, and the eagle for John. These symbols come from John the Revelator's vision of the throne of God, in Revelation 4:6: "And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight." As you can see, this vision was in turn inspired by the prophet Ezekiel's vision of the "four living creatures" which he describes in chapter 1: "As for the likeness of their faces, each had a human face. The four had the face of a lion on the right side, the four had the face of an ox on the left side, and the four had the face of an eagle" (Ezekiel 1:10). So these four symbols of the Gospels are derived from images that go back to the Hebrew Scriptures.



Palm Sunday begins what Christians know as "Holy Week," the last week of Jesus' time in Jerusalem, culminating in the events of the Last Supper, the crucifixion, and as the new week dawns, his resurrection from the dead. So today we're looking at Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem. As we recall, in Luke 9:51 Jesus, then in Galilee, "set his face to go to Jerusalem." Jesus has always known that to Jerusalem he must go. Luke records his response to some Pharisees who warned him that King Herod was "out to get him":

"Go and tell that fox, 'Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course. Nevertheless, I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following, for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem.' O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! Behold, your house is forsaken. And I tell you, you will not see me until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!'" (Luke 13:32-35)

Palm Sunday, as we can see, brings those words of Jesus to completion.

Now I want to comment on one aspect of Jesus' coming to Jerusalem that you may not have thought about. Even though we're rural or small-town people here, do we not think of cities as being more sophisticated than rural areas, more in touch with world affairs and current developments? If we want to hit the shopping malls, or see a major league game, or attend a symphony performance, or fly out of a major airport, don't we go to some larger metropolitan area, even as far as Chicago or St. Louis? So when we think of Jesus starting out in Galilee and then coming to Jerusalem, perhaps we think of a simple, small-town preacher coming to the "big city" and encountering a more sophisticated environment, where elites of the city would regard him as something of a "country hick."

I want to suggest we would have it all backwards! Between ancient Egypt and Syria ran an important trade route, traveled by people familiar with the culture of the Graeco-Roman world. And that trade route ran right through Galilee, in the northern part of what we call the "Holy Land." Jerusalem, on the other hand, lies up in the hills of Judea near the Dead Sea; as far as important routes of commerce and communication are concerned, Jerusalem is really "off the beaten path." What we have then, on Palm Sunday, is the sophisticated scholar who understands not



only the Scriptures but also what's going on in the wider world, coming up to this backwoods place where the local "hicks" really have no idea what's going on in the "big picture." Jesus, from Galilee, *sees the big picture* of God's plan for Israel, the people he's chosen to carry his name to all nations. But his opponents in Jerusalem have only a *limited vision* of how God's going to fulfill the promises he's made to his people.

Not only this, but Jesus is heading up a growing movement that threatens the status of these Jerusalem "honchos." Luke tells us it was a "whole multitude of his disciples" who greeted Jesus as he entered the city, not



"Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!" – Luke 19:38

just a small band of followers. "All the people were hanging on his words," he adds. So it's easy to see why the local authorities concluded Jesus had to be eliminated. Sometimes people say that the crowds that welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem with happy shouts of "Hosanna" turned against him by the end of the week and called for his death. That's not true. The crowd that cried, "Let him be crucified!" was not the same crowd that hailed Jesus as he entered the city. It was a different crowd entirely.

What did Jesus mean by staging his entrance into Jerusalem in this way, riding in on a donkey? Matthew's Gospel tells us it was to fulfill what the prophet Zechariah wrote: "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 . . ." (Zechariah 9:9; Matthew 21:5). Jesus is demonstrating, without declaring it in so many words, that he has come to do what a Messiah, Israel's anointed ruler and deliverer, was to do.

Luke doesn't mention Zechariah's prophecy, but he goes on to tell us how Jesus entered the Temple and drove out the people who were abusing this "house of prayer" with their commercial transactions. We need a little background here that Luke doesn't supply for us. For one thing, the local coinage was Roman. But you couldn't buy a pigeon or a dove for your sacrifice with a coin that bore the image of the head of Caesar. First you had to exchange that coinage for special Temple coinage, and the currency exchange people took their "cut" from this transaction. More importantly, these exchanges and sales of sacrificial animals were in the Temple's outer court, the "Court of the Gentiles," where people who weren't Jews were allowed to come and pray. But with all this commercial activity crowding the court, there was no room left for Gentiles to worship in what was supposed to be "a house of prayer for all nations."

Jesus has come to reform the worship of the Temple — and if you look at the history recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures you would understand that the role of reformer of Israel's Temple worship was *a role performed by the king*. For Jesus to cleanse the Temple amounted to a claim that he has come to Jerusalem as its true King — as the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, ironically and unwittingly recognized when he had a sign put up on Jesus' cross that read, "This is the King of the Jews" (Luke 23:38).



"It is written, 'My house shall be a house of prayer,' but you have made it a den of robbers." – Luke 19:46

“Indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords” — yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.” — 1 Corinthians 8:5-6



Okay, that’s the history lesson. But let’s come back to the twenty-first century and ask, “How is Jesus coming to us as *our* King? The earliest Christian confession was, “Jesus is Lord.” That was their way of declaring that cultural authorities and influences were not the “lord,” or *boss*, of their lives, but Jesus was. Throughout the Roman Empire, Caesar claimed the title of “lord,” demanding worship and sacrifice in his honor — whatever other “gods” people worshiped. People in those days weren’t fussy about how many different “gods” they worshiped, but Christians (and Jews) were different. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “Indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords” — yet for us there is one God, the Father, from

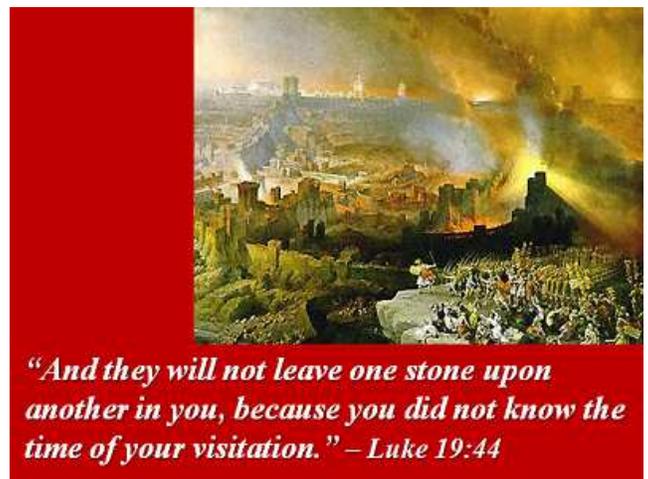
whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Corinthians 8:5-6). So when we sing, “He is Lord, He is Lord, he is risen from the dead and he is Lord” we’re joining in that confession. But *is it really true for us* that the risen Jesus and the Scriptures we receive from his hand are the governing authority in our lives, shaping what we do and say? Have we let Jesus in to “cleanse our temple” as he came to Jerusalem two millennia ago? Just asking!

But let’s back up to what Jesus said just before he entered the city to cleanse the temple. Addressing the city, this is what he says:

“Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation” (Luke 19:42-44).

What’s Jesus saying? “Because you won’t listen to my message about the arrival of the kingdom of God, because you won’t give up your idea of your religious exclusiveness as if you’re the only people who are part of God’s plan, you’ll be utterly destroyed.” I’m putting words in Jesus’ mouth here, but when we survey everything he’s said up to now about how the Lord is calling Israel back to its original mission of blessing all people, then we understand why he’s predicting destruction for this city. He warned his people about this earlier, in Luke 13:3: “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” Jesus wasn’t talking about hell here; he was speaking of events about to occur on the plane of earthly history. His prediction came true in the year 70 when the Romans suppressed a Jewish revolt, burned the city of Jerusalem, and destroyed the beautiful Temple that had been completed only a few years earlier. Luke may be writing after those things happened, but his sources remembered what Jesus had said.

What happens to any nation, or any culture, that rejects the gospel of God and denies the reality of his coming through his Son Jesus? Powerful influences are at work today in our Western culture, and in our country, to suppress the Christian faith or to restrict its impact upon public life. Is what happened to the twin towers of New York City a harbinger of things to come — as, indeed, other things have already come? Does the threat of a North Korean ballistic missile, or an Iranian nuclear weapon, bring up a picture of what might be in store for a civilization that turns its back on the Word of God? Are Jesus’ words a warning for us today, as well: “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish”? And we’re not talking about hell, but about human history in our own time. Again, just asking!



Now, finally, let's turn to Luke's account of the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples, on what today we call Maundy Thursday or Holy Thursday, four days after Palm Sunday. (Of course those weren't the names of these days at that time; in current Hebrew they would be called *yom rishon* and *yom hamshi*, "first day" and "fifth day.") Between these two days the Gospels record a lot of material, principally Jesus' controversies with the Pharisees and his predictions of "the end," which we can take as the end of the "old covenant" but not the end of the world. Much of that material is covered in parallel by both Matthew and Luke, and also in part by the other Gospels. But we're mostly following the events as Luke alone relates them to us, so we're skipping to the account of the upper room, where Jesus leads his disciples in that evening Passover meal that we now call the Lord's Supper, the origin of our observance of Holy Communion.



"This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me. . . . This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." – Luke 22:19-20

We're familiar with the basic outline of the Last Supper, from the accounts we have from Paul (in 1 Corinthians) and from the first three Gospels. (John's account is different, since he's the one who tells us about Jesus washing the feet of his disciples.) So we know that the Last Supper was a Passover meal. Yet it wasn't a typical Passover meal that other Jews would have celebrated. Passover is a remembrance of the exodus from Egypt, when the Lord freed his people from their slavery in Egypt. But Jesus turns this event into a demonstration of how his followers would experience a *new exodus* — a breakout into a new kind of life. This new deliverance would be accomplished through his death and resurrection, when he would give his own body and blood to renew God's agreement with his people.

As Luke records his words: "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me. . . . This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:19-20). A covenant is an agreement between partners, in which each partner promises to be loyal to the other. Jesus is telling his disciples that through his death on the cross God would be renewing his covenant, his promise to Israel to make them his special family on earth. And that would be their exodus, their rescue out of an old life with its twisted ideas and misdirected motives into a new life energized by the Spirit of God. Whenever his followers would observe this special meal, they would be, in effect, writing themselves into this story.

So Jesus commands them, "Do this in remembrance of me." We need to pay special attention to that phrase, because it doesn't mean what we often take it to mean. It doesn't just mean that when we observe Holy Communion we *remember* what Jesus did on the cross, as if the only thing that happens is that some synapses fire in our brains and a memory pops into our mind. That would make our faith into nothing but a head trip. The Greek word Luke and the other Gospels use here is *anamnesis*. It doesn't just mean "remember," it means "recall." When we observe the Lord's Supper, we *recall* the presence of Jesus; we bring him into our midst. We use that word "recall" in a similar sense today. If two nations are having a dispute, for example, they might "recall their ambassadors," or bring them home as a gesture of protest. Or if a manufacturer discovers a major defect in one of its products, it will recall the product. It's not just remembering that the product had a problem; it's bringing it back, taking it off the shelf so it won't be sold. But we *recall* Jesus in a positive sense; we bring him back so we can be with him and enjoy the benefits of being in his presence.



"For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." – Luke 22:18

In the account we have from Luke, Jesus stresses this idea of recalling. Here's how he puts it: "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in

the kingdom of God. . . . For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes" (Luke 22:15-16, 18). Matthew records his words this way: "I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom" (Matthew 26:29). What is Jesus telling us? I think he's telling his followers that the kingdom of God is made real whenever they gather to recall him into their midst.

Friends, this is powerful stuff! Can we get hold of it? Can we settle in our minds that when we gather at the Lord's Table we're not just going through a ceremony, a kind of memory aid that helps us think about what Jesus did centuries ago? As we receive these emblems of Jesus' body and blood, can we sense that the kingdom of God is here because the King has come to us? Can we, then, can joyfully join that crowd that shouts, Hosanna! "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!"

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