

Palm Sunday 2022

Philippians 2:5-11 Luke 19:28-40

From the writings of the prophet Zechariah: “Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” (Zechariah 9:9)

Luke does not quote these words in his telling of Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem –Matthew and John do, incidentally – but the story is nevertheless shaped and informed by them. Jesus’s intention was crystal clear to any participant, to any onlooker.

In the ninth chapter of his gospel, Luke has told us how Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51). It is where prophets meet their death. It is his destiny. Ever since then, in the readings Sunday by Sunday, we have been following him on this road. Now, at last, he has arrived. It is not a haphazard scene. Everything goes according to plan.

Jesus sends two of the disciples to fetch a colt from the village. He tells them what to say if anyone challenges them. Understandably, the owners of the colt do ask why they are untying it. They reply as Jesus has instructed and the owners give permission for them to take the colt. It is quite possible that the owners were part of the larger circle that supported Jesus in his mission, and that borrowing the colt was pre-arranged. This event is not a surprise; it is planned and expected.

The royal and Messianic implications of this entry are not lost on anyone. Those who follow with acclamations echo Psalm 118:26 – “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord”, except that they change the words to say, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.” A significant amendment! All these suggestions of kings and Messiahs make the onlooking Pharisees very nervous. They understand that such a display must surely bring down the wrath of the Roman occupiers, who are everywhere in Jerusalem at the time of the Passover festival. Passover is a freedom festival. The Romans have braced themselves for insurrection. So the Pharisees implore Jesus to tell his disciples to stop their subversive singing.

The question of Palm Sunday is, what kind of king is Jesus?

It was the Roman custom that a general who had succeeded on the battlefield would then enter the city in a triumphal procession. Of course, those military exploits would also have been extremely violent. The crowd of waving, chanting people surrounding Jesus would have been reminiscent of those Roman triumphs. Jesus’s arrival at Jerusalem is a statement about power. And yet, this is a very strange entry. Instead of arriving in a horse-drawn chariot, Jesus chooses a donkey, and not just any donkey, but an untried colt, one that has never been ridden. As the

prophet Zechariah says, it is a symbol, not of aggression, but of humility. Triumphant is he, yes, but in a way that turns the world's understanding of that word on its head.

There is another kind of power at work in this story. The crowd praises God for "all the deeds of power that they had seen". In Luke's narrative, John the Baptist goes before God "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1:17). Jesus returns to Nazareth from his wilderness sojourn "filled with the Spirit's power" (Luke 4:14). He uses that power to heal and cast out other spirits. Power goes out from him when people touch him (Luke 6:19). In other words, the power of Jesus was to make things right in the world, to restore broken bodies and minds to wholeness. It is these "deeds of power" that cause the people to acclaim Jesus as king.

We know that the Jews looked for, and the Romans feared, a conquering Messiah, a military hero who would come in power and might and throw off the shackles of the hated occupation. Israel would be free again, the throne of David would be restored, and the oppressors driven from the land. That was what the people wanted. What they got was a very different kind of Messiah king.

What kind of king is Jesus? For an answer, we may turn to the words of Paul to the Philippians. Before quoting the hymn that may have been in circulation before Paul wrote his letter, he urges his readers, "Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourself. Let each of you look not to your own interest, but to the interests of others." (Philippians 2:2-4). Then he continues, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" and goes on to the hymn itself. That hymn sings of a Messiah who empties himself. Jesus is a king who does not grasp at power or status. In humility, he becomes human and suffers death – not just any death, but death on a cross. The "God of power and might" we acclaim each week in the Eucharist is one whose arms are outstretched in surrender. It is because of this self-emptying that God exalts him. As the letter to the Hebrews says, "Although he was a Son, he learned obedience by what he suffered" (Hebrews 5:8). This king redefines our notions of power.

However, we should not think of Jesus's exaltation as a reward for his suffering, as though God were saying, "There, there, it's all right now". Rather, we are to see that, in Jesus's death and resurrection, God's reign of mercy and justice has begun, and that self-giving love is indeed stronger than death. It is in such self-emptying servitude that the God whom Jesus called Abba is revealed. The glory of God is characterized by the giving of self for the sake of the other. And for us, to "have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus" is not simply to follow his example as an ethical teaching, but to live in the same way he did, a new way of being marked by mutual sharing of joys and burdens, mutual self-giving and sacrifice in "the interests of others".

The lectionary cuts the gospel reading for today short. As Jesus comes near the city, he again laments over it with weeping, saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace!" (Luke 19:42). He anticipates the destruction that did in fact occur when the Roman army finally destroyed Jerusalem and the temple, sending the people into exile. And then he concludes, "You did not recognize the time of your visitation from God," recalling the words of the Song of Zechariah in chapter 1: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people," (Luke 1:68). The divine visitation is for the purpose of salvation.

Luke chapter 19 then ends with Jesus entering the Temple and clearing out the buyers and sellers, the action that prompts the leaders to find a way to kill him. Entering the city, weeping over it, and cleansing the Temple are all events of one day. Today marks the beginning of the final stage of Jesus's mission, the last week of his life. Today marks the beginning of our Holy Week, following Jesus during these last days. We need to walk that journey with him, from the upper room and the humble act of washing the disciples' feet, giving himself in a new way in the bread and wine, to the garden, the betrayal, the arrest, the trial and mockery, to the crucifixion and burial, if we are truly to rejoice in the resurrection at Easter. Living as we do in a culture that shies away from pain and suffering and exalts the shiny, the new and exciting, we are bearers of a different story, a story of suffering and self-giving that leads paradoxically to life and new creation. We also live in a world deeply divided, besieged by violence, tyranny, and abhorrent acts of cruelty, a world not so different from the one inhabited by Jesus and Paul, where the *Pax Romana* was enforced at the end of a sword. If humanity were to take Paul's words to heart and live, as Jesus did, for the sake of others, we too might discover the things that make for peace and find redemption.

Prayer

O God of eternal glory, whose servant, Jesus Christ, bore our sins, encouraged the weary, and raised up the fallen: keep before our eyes his passion and resurrection, so that our lives may be signs of his obedience and victory. We ask this in the name of Christ, our liberator. Amen.

Opening Prayers, 1997 (International Committee on English in the Liturgy, 1999, commended by the Council of General Synod, 2016)