

“Welcoming the King”
Mark 11:1-11 (NRSV)

We’re in the middle of a national election to choose the members of the next Canadian parliament. I’m sure you know that those whom we elect will determine the Prime Minister, the shape of his Cabinet, and the other members of the government, as well as the leaders and the members of Her Majesty’s Loyal Opposition. It’s a very important duty in a democracy to get out and vote. After May 2nd, we will await **the usual swearing in ceremony of the Cabinet at Rideau Hall in Ottawa** and the opening of the next parliament, inaugurated by **the Governor General and the Canadian Armed Forces on parade.**

But I rather think **the only parades on our minds just now are the upcoming parades to and from Westminster Abbey** for the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton on April 29th, **and the final, triumphant parade around the hockey rink** by the Vancouver Canucks hoisting the Stanley Cup, as they surely should, sometime in June.

I suppose each of us will enjoy the pomp and circumstance surrounding these **national and international parades** in different ways: there are determined political junkies, ardent royal watchers, and fanatic hockey fans among us, and there are those, I suppose, who will not care much for any of these events, yet can we agree that the shine of such events will wear off soon enough? **Parliaments and royal weddings come and go**; and, next year, **other hockey teams and new champions will emerge.**

Parades always come and go. Even the acclamations, “Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” (11:9), which rang out at the parade arranged for Jesus on Palm Sunday, as he came into Jerusalem for the last time, faded quickly enough. **Welcomed as the crowds’ popular hero, he soon enough became the people’s pariah.** Yet, in spite of all that, **Jesus’ parade was different**; there was something more lasting happening. **Jesus was a new and a different kind of king.** Jesus operated from different principles than most of the rulers and kings of his day. To demonstrate that, Jesus -- whom the Bible describes as “the Lord of lords and King of kings” (Rev. 17:14) -- came into Jerusalem riding on a donkey.

Before we consider that **ageless story** once again, let’s get some of the atmosphere of **that first Palm Sunday.**

To begin with, **Jesus was at the end of a journey** that had begun some months before when he purposely chose to zigzag through Galilee, then Samaria, then Perea (the area east of the Jordan), and finally Judea. During this journey, **he'd ministered in at least 35 communities**, timing the journey so he'd end up in Jerusalem for the Passover. And, now that he was close to the city, staying with his friends in Bethany, on the southeastern outskirts of Jerusalem, **popular expectations were high**. Earlier, **he'd raised Lazarus from the dead**; and the sensational news had spread around Jerusalem several times. The numbers observing his entourage increased dramatically. Then, after **he'd healed blind Bartimaeus** in Jericho, just north east of the city, the pilgrims, moving on ahead of him to Jerusalem for the Passover, spread the news to everyone (10:46). Now, as **Jesus stayed overnight in Bethany**, great crowds were coming out from the city to see him (and, no doubt, the resurrected Lazarus too). Meanwhile, the religious leaders were counselling together as to how they might get rid of him, all the while worrying that increasing numbers were believing in him (Jn. 12:9-11).

Many wondered, **“What’s next?” “Would Jesus make another move?”** If so, **“When and what would it be?” “What would the authorities do?”** As the pressure mounted, the Lord indeed took definite, calculated and premeditated action.

1. The King’s deliberate preparation (Mark 11:1-6).

Travellers approaching Jerusalem from the east, coming from **Bethany**, about two miles from the city, would have had to pass by the village of **Bethphage** on the slopes of the Mount of Olives. (I’ve taken that walk myself with a few others from Prince George a number of years ago.) So, on that first Palm Sunday, **Jesus and his disciples came to Bethphage**. Pointedly, **Jesus was walking ahead of his disciples**. The Bible says they dawdled behind him because they were worried about what was going to happen (10:32). When they reached Bethphage **Jesus sent two of his disciples into the hamlet to obtain a donkey’s unbidden colt**. As to how Jesus knew it was there, the Scriptures are silent. Maybe, like the borrowed use of the upper meeting room for the Passover meal (14:13-15), Jesus had prearranged it. Certainly, it’s interesting to notice **Jesus frequently depended upon other people’s generosity**. Whatever the case, we may surmise the owner gave the colt to the disciples because he’d heard of Jesus and trusted him. **The owner was likely honoured Jesus would ask to use something that he was prepared to give him**.

In all of this **we observe Jesus' painstaking premeditation**. Jesus had carefully arranged everything. True, the day and hour were selected from eternity by God (Acts 2:23), but now **everything proceeded with countdown perfection**. As we know, this Triumphal Entry on the first day of the week would precipitate his terrible death on the cross the following Friday, his "rest" in the grave on the Sabbath (or Saturday), and his triumphant resurrection on Sunday, the first day of the Christian Church, his Body! **Not only the timing of his entry into Jerusalem, but the mode of it as well, on a previously unbidden donkey, was carefully chosen**. After so much of his ministry had been carried out in the corners of the country, deliberately unheralded, **Jesus was now purposely going public**. Never before had he done anything to provoke a public demonstration. In fact, he'd repeatedly withdrawn from the crowds if there was any hint that this was going to happen. He'd often made a point of telling people to keep what his healing work to themselves (e.g., 1:43; 3:12; 4:33-34; 7:36; 8:26; & 9:30-31). But **now he was prepared to let his "Messianic secret" out of the bag**. Now **Jesus courted danger with calculated purpose**.

Why the choice of a young donkey? Because over 500 years before, the prophet **Zechariah had prophesied that the Messiah would come riding on the foal of a donkey**: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey" (9:9). Jesus consciously fulfilled this prophecy to the letter and, in fact, he exceeded it, for he chose a colt upon which no one had ever ridden. Perhaps this was a fulfillment of another prophecy, that an animal devoted to a sacred task must be one that had never been put to ordinary use (Num. 19:2; Deut. 21:3; 1 Sam. 6:7). The point is clear, **Jesus did not come riding upon a military charger, a grand horse that would impress everyone; he rode into Jerusalem upon a lowly donkey**.

In addition to this, Jesus told his disciples **they'd find the colt "tied" (or tethered) in Bethphage** (11:2). This alludes to another Messianic oracle, pronounced by Jacob upon his son, Judah, hinting also at Jesus' eventual bloody sacrifice: "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from beneath his feet, until tribute comes to him; and the obedience of the peoples is his. Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he washes his garments in wine and his robe in the blood of the grapes..." (Gen. 49:9-10).

Jesus Christ, the Lion of the tribe of Judah (Rev. 5:5), wants us to see the connections here. By riding on a donkey, **he fulfills prophetic Messianic Scripture** (William L. Lane, Mark, 1975, p. 395), and **he deliberately identifies himself with the royal line of David.** In David's time, riding a donkey (contrary to what we may think today) is a kingly act; only afterwards did kings aspire to ride horses (Merrill F. Unger, Zechariah, 1972, p. 163-165). **King Jesus knew exactly what he was doing when he rode a donkey into Jerusalem!**

Jesus' choice of a donkey told the whole world who he was, and it proclaimed **what he was like.** Zechariah's prophecy described the Messiah as being **"humble" or "gentle."** Jesus came unassumingly and peaceably.

Jesus is unlike any king (or ruler) that ever lived. What a contrast his quiet, simple entry through the city gates was to the triumphal entry of ancient kings, flamboyant on their war-horses, riding proudly and swaggeringly, cruel-lipped, swords held aloft, trailed by captive kings and princes in chains! How unlike the entry of the Caesars, the Alexanders, the Napoleons, the Stalins, the Hitlers, or more recent potentates of this world! There was no pomposity or pretentiousness about him. There was "no golden carriage," no limousine, and there were no armed guards! Jesus was not aloof or unreachable. He was down-to-earth, easy to connect with, and delightful to welcome and accept. As **Rien Poortvliet**, the Dutch painter, put it, he was like "one of us." Jesus came slowly, purposefully and humbly, riding on the colt of a donkey.

Jesus also came peacefully, seeking to bring peace to a war-torn world. Seven hundred and fifty years earlier, Isaiah had prophesied that the Messiah would come as **the "Prince of Peace"** (9:6c). When he was born, the angels had announced that "on earth [there would be] peace among those whom [God] favours" (2:14). Jesus had told his disciples, **"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.** I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid" (Jn. 14:27). Further, he'd said, "... all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Matt. 26:52b). And his reassuring, resurrection greeting and benediction, **"Peace be with you"** (Jn. 20:19, 21, 26b) is still an appropriate Christian greeting, benediction and gospel offer today. Jesus came openly, vulnerably, risking rejection, and ready to "turn the other [cheek]" (Matt. 5:39), as he rode right through all manifestations of Roman power and pomp toward the Jewish Temple. (That's no way to win a hockey game!)

But Jesus' riding of the donkey into Jerusalem perfectly portrayed **his position as the suffering Messiah** and **his person as the Prince of Peace**.

Are you ready to welcome him? Are you ready to see **the fruit of his Spirit is developed in you**, which is "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23a)?

2. The king's triumphal entry (Mark 11:7-10).

Having obtained the donkey, **the triumphal march began**. The disciples "brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks upon it; and he sat upon it" (10:7). "Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields" (10:8). **All eyes were focused on Jesus**, and homage poured forth from "those who went ahead and those who followed" (10:9). **People were prepared to give Jesus everything** -- even to trample on their property if he so desired. They did this repeatedly as the procession moved forward. It was a magnificent gesture.

And they acclaimed Jesus as their king. As he rode up to the ridge where "the road [went] down the Mount of Olives" (Lk. 19:37), pilgrims from Bethany and Bethphage joined in the procession, **the parade enlarged its exuberance**. When they reached the spot where everyone could catch a glimpse of the southeastern corner of the city with its magnificent terraces and imposing towers, constructed of massive, golden, gleaming limestone, they broke into loud Eastern praise (Alfred Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, 1967, vol. 2, p. 367). **Repeatedly, they cried out to each other in antiphonal song**. Some sang, "Hosanna!" Others musically replied, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" Others answered, in chanting chorus, "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!" "Hosanna in the highest heaven!" (10:10; cf. 2 Kgs. 9:13; Lane, p. 397).

One of the lines was a well-known phrase from **the "Hallel" Psalm 118:24**, verses of which the ancient pilgrims always sang as they walked down from the Mount of Olives up to Jerusalem. Only there it was rendered -- as in Luke's Gospel -- "Blessed is **the king** who comes in the name of the Lord" (Lk. 19:38). They were anticipating the Messiah. Now Jesus' contemporaries believed, **the moment had come; the Messiah was here among them**. Clearly, theirs was a swelling, joyous jubilation.

“**Hosanna**” was a customary religious greeting at Passover, but now on the lips of the fervent crowd it was an anticipatory cry that literally meant, “**Save!**” or “**Save us!**” It was kind of like they were saying, in one and the same breath, “**Hosanna!**” – “**Praise be to you!**” – and “**Help!**” The people were hoping and praying that Jesus would be their Deliverer. Yet, likely, they didn’t fully recognize what they were saying. As John later remarked, not even the disciples understood the full import of what was being said and sung; only later, “when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him” (Jn.12:16). Nevertheless, **the acclamations repeatedly described Jesus Christ’s proper personhood and position.**

3. **The King’s tears** (Luke 19:41-44).

Now I turn to another incident in **Luke’s account** of the day’s events.

The road down to Jerusalem descended into a hollow, and the sight of the city was gain withdrawn from the multitudes because of the intervening ridge and vegetation, mostly pine and olive trees. But after a few steps, the path mounted again, and in an instant, the whole city, not just part of it, came into view! With the Kedron Valley falling below, Jesus (and the crowd) saw the Holy City as if it was gloriously rising out of a deep abyss. **Before them, set apart from all the houses, the vast Temple mount, the Temple courts, and the Temple itself, with its twin pillars and gleaming stones, was displayed.** (I myself have seen this awesome sight several times. Only, ever since 684, a grand, golden Muslim mosque, the Dome of the Rock, has replaced the Temple. But it is still beautiful beyond compare.)

With the whole panorama of the city before his eyes, Luke’s Gospel tells us, **Jesus began to weep** (19:41). We must never forget this. It wasn’t with quiet tears that he wept, as he had done at the grave of Lazarus, but with loud and deep sorrow. Naturally, the whole crowd was stunned into silence while the Lord of the Universe wailed over Jerusalem. Truly, this was a different kind of king! Jesus’ wailing turned into lamentation as he observed that **this city didn’t have a clue about “the things that make for peace!”** (19:42). But the days were coming when Jerusalem would be entirely destroyed, actually about thirty years later, in 70 AD, by Titus’s Roman legions, and by fire (19:43-44a). Jesus saw all this in prospect and he cried in **compassionate grief** for his people. **This was the heart of a new kind of king.**

Certainly, **Jesus' sorrow indicated his humanity, but it also revealed more fully the compassionate heart of God.** Fix this in your thoughts. This is how Jesus Christ, the broken-hearted Messiah, the Son of God the Father, and his blessed Holy Spirit sorrow over hearts that do “not recognize the time of [our] visitation from God” (19:44b), and “the things that make for peace!” (19:42) – namely, repentance towards God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

It's fine and fun to watch the parade going by, and even to celebrate. But recognize, too, that there is always something deeper to ponder.

Here's something to think about,

The Son of God in tears,
The wondering angels see.
Be thou astonished, O my soul;
He shed those tears for thee.

Jesus Christ must have enjoyed the adulation of the crowd. But he would've been well aware of what would happen to him soon enough. Adulation would turn to accusation. Homage would turn to hate. Joy would turn to anguish. “Then,” we are told, “Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late [-- indeed! --], he went out to Bethany with the twelve” (11:11), to enjoy one more evening with his dearest friends.

Friends, the tears of Christ measure the infinite value of our souls. Christ wept and lamented over Jerusalem, as he always weeps over the hearts and souls and lives of those he seeks to reclaim.

This is our King. Let us welcome and worship him with all that we have!

Amen

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