

## TRIUMPHAL ENTRY

SHERARD EDINGTON

Luke 19:28-40

Little Johnny was five-years-old and sick with a sore throat. He had to stay home from church. It was Palm Sunday and when his family returned home, they were carrying several palm fronds. Johnny asked them what they were for.

His father said, "People held them over Jesus' head as he walked by."  
"Wouldn't you know it," Johnny fumed, "I miss one Sunday and Jesus shows up."

Today is not Palm Sunday. Palm Sunday is always the Sunday just before Easter and I don't expect to see Easter again for another eight months. We are reading this account of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem because that is where we are in our year-long trek through Luke's gospel. Today, also marks our entry into a new section of this gospel. We are leaving the Travel Narrative and moving into the final days of Jesus' life—his time in Jerusalem. We know how this will end.

As you will recall, this gospel began with the prophecies of the births of John and of Jesus. In chapter 2, Jesus' birth in Bethlehem is announced by angels who sang *Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!* (2:14). Luke recounts Jesus' childhood, his baptism, and his testing in the wilderness.

The second section of Luke describes Jesus' ministry in Galilee. He teaches, he performs deeds of power, he gathers his first disciples, he lays out his ethical expectations of his followers—that they should love their enemies and do good to those who hate them, and more.

In chapter 9, Luke begins the Travel Narrative. We call it this because Jesus leaves Galilee and *set his face to go to Jerusalem*. Then, from chapter 9 to chapter 19, Luke presents a series of teachings, stories, and parables that illustrate what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

Luke is clearly using this gospel, and especially the Travel Narrative, as a way to teach his congregation what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

Today, we come to the end of that journey—a journey that has taken us five months. Today's readings encompass three pericopes (stories): Jesus entry into Jerusalem, his weeping over the city, and his cleansing the temple.

In last week's reading, Jesus was in Jericho. That is where he encountered Zacchaeus. Jericho is about 15 miles outside Jerusalem and the last stop on a

pilgrim's journey to the city. Jesus stops outside Jerusalem at the hill known as the Mount of Olives where there are two villages—Bethphage and Bethany.

When Jesus and his entourage arrive at this place he sends two of the disciples ahead with these instructions: *Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'*

The two disciples comply and they find the animal as described. It is a colt—a young donkey. When the owners of the animal confront them, they respond, *The Lord needs it*, and they let them go.

How did Jesus know about the donkey? There are two possibilities. One is a supernatural explanation—that Jesus uses his power to see into the village. This is certainly possible. But a second explanation is more in keeping with Luke, given what Luke will tell us as in a moment. I believe that the business with the colt had been prearranged by Jesus. It is strong evidence of the growing network of followers, disciples, and apostles that surround him. We have seen in other places in Luke where Jesus has sent his people ahead to prepare for his arrival (10:1). Throughout the gospel, Jesus' following has been increasing. It is entirely possible that Jesus, or one of his people, had pre-arranged with the owners of the animal.

The choice of a colt is highly symbolic. It is a young animal that *has never been ridden*. It is ritually pure; it is suitable for sacred use. It becomes a vehicle for a sacrifice.

A donkey is humble, it is common, it is unassuming. It is keeping with Jesus' teachings that the humble will be exalted, that the last will be first. It also echoes the words of Zechariah, *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* (9:9).

Jesus' disciples place their cloaks on the animal to create a saddle and Jesus begins riding toward Jerusalem. As he goes, others take their cloaks and spread them on the ground. They are creating a road for their king. Their actions are also symbolic. They echo an event from 2 Kings. When Jehu was proclaimed to be king of Israel, we read that his followers *hurriedly... took their cloaks and spread them for him on the steps* (2 Kings 9:13).

As Jesus nears Jerusalem, *The whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen*. The people shout out, *Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord*. This is from Psalm 118 (118:26) and is a traditional greeting for Passover pilgrims. However, the word 'king' is added by the people.

The second line that the people shout out echoes the song of the angels at Jesus' birth. The disciples now cry, *Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven* (19:38b).

Did you notice what is missing in Luke's story? Palms. There are no palms waved by the people. Also, there are no Hosannas as we find in the other gospels. For example, in Matthew the crowds cry, *Hosanna in the highest heaven!* (21:9) Luke's story is smaller, more intimate. In the other gospels, Jesus gets swept along by the throngs of pilgrims heading toward Jerusalem. You get the feeling in Luke, that it is just Jesus and his followers.

In the second periscope of our reading today, Jesus weeps over the city. As Jesus approaches the city he says, *the things that make for peace you did not recognize and now they are hidden from your eyes*. He goes on to prophesy that one day the enemies of Jerusalem will lay siege and crush the city. *Not one stone will be left upon another*. Fifty years later, Luke's congregation would understand the full meaning of these words. In 70 AD, Jerusalem was the center of a rebellion called the Jewish-Roman War. The Jews lost. Jerusalem fell.

In the third pericope, Jesus goes to the temple and creates a scene when he begins to drive out those who were selling things. He says, *It is written, 'My house shall be a house of prayer'; but you have made it a den of robbers*.

Luke concludes this section by noting that each day Jesus was in the temple and the chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for ways to kill him. But there was nothing they could do because the people were *spellbound by what they heard*. Jesus following continues to grow.

As I have suggested throughout this gospel, Luke is teaching his congregation how to be followers of Jesus. What does it mean to commit to a life of discipleship? In today's readings, Luke offers his people three lessons. And they all center on the theme of seeing.

The first lesson is that Jesus was real because people had seen him. Even fifty years after his death, there was some question about whether or not Jesus had actually existed. Was he human or was he a spirit? Was he just a myth or a legend? As proof, Luke tells about all those people accompanying Jesus into Jerusalem. And as they go, they shout praises to God for all the deeds of power they had witnessed—the many healings, the feeding of thousands, the casting out of demons, the forgiving of sins. The proof is in the people. Our faith today is based on the testimony of those many people who witnessed Jesus—a testimony that has been shared through the centuries.

The second lesson Luke offers is that while people have seen Jesus, many did not understand what he stood for, that he represented God, that he represented

peace. In his lament over Jerusalem, Jesus says that the city (which represents the Jewish people) did not recognize when God was with them. Because of that, peace was hidden from their eyes. The consequences of not recognizing God is destruction. Not a stone will be left upon another. For Luke's congregation, this was a reality—Jerusalem had been destroyed. For us today, when we fail to see God, the world around us suffers.

The third lesson is that while Jesus was teaching in the temple, the ruling authorities were looking for ways to kill him. This serves as a reminder for people that as followers of Jesus, they may suffer persecution. What Jesus offers the world is not something that is universally welcomed. There are powerful forces that are threatened by talk of peace and love. There are too many who profit from hatred and injustice. We continue to see this every day; it is impossible to ignore.

Luke's lessons to his people are 1) that Jesus is real and that he was witnessed by many, 2) that some do not see what Jesus brings to the world and for them there will be consequences, and 3) those who are followers of Jesus may suffer persecution.

We have reached a turning point in this gospel. We know how it will end. The one who offers peace will die in the most violent of ways. The one who offers love will be rejected. The one promises forgiveness will be betrayed. As followers of Jesus, we are challenged to practice peace, we are called to offer love, we are directed to be forgiving. We know that when we do these things we may risk persecution. But we do them not in the name of a myth or a legend, but for the one who is the son of God, the one who gave his life so that we may know the kingdom. We do them because to not do them is simply unthinkable. Amen.