

## Behold the King!

Luke 19:28-44

In the days of Moses, the Law of *Jehovah* prescribed that on the tenth day of the first month of every Hebrew year, each family in Israel (or two families if they were poor) was to select a lamb with which to commemorate the Passover. Four days later, that lamb was to be sacrificed.

Centuries later, at the beginning of a certain Passover festival, a day we now call Palm Sunday, a crowd in Jerusalem celebrated the arrival of One they called their king. Little did they know that this King first had to fill the role of Passover Lamb by dying for their sins. From the fall of creation, when God announced that the seed of woman would crush the head of the serpent to the final prophet, the Old Testament pointed to a Savior Who would arrive to break the curse of sin. The Apostle Paul calls Jesus our "Passover lamb" (1 Corinthians 5:7). John the Baptist rightly identified Him as, "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). Of course, no one seemed to be thinking in those terms on this day. Jesus was getting the red carpet treatment.

Glitter. Glamour. Gossip. These are the Three G's of the Hollywood red carpet treatment. Every year, the E! Network begins its annual coverage of the Academy Awards six hours before the event, so that viewers (and there are plenty of them) won't miss what a single celebrity is wearing. Designer gowns, expensive jewels and anti-anxiety drugs roll across the Oscar Red Carpet every year. That's right. It takes a lot of medication to appear relaxed and glamorous at what one Hollywood fashion king calls "the most terrifying, neurosis-making event of the year."

For a few brief moments, the celebrity Christ received the celebrity treatment from His wildly adoring fans as He entered Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday. Excited admirers waved palm branches as Jesus entered the city on the foal of a donkey, just as King Solomon did before his coronation. Jesus was a superstar, complete with the glitter of a royal entrance, the glamour of waving palm branches and even the gossip that caused the entourage to grow and grow.

But, there was a twist: Jesus refused to be swayed by the expectations and demands of His fan base. Those palm branches had a patriotic overtone, like the stars and stripes at a political rally today. The crowd was acclaiming Jesus as their king, and they expected Him to behave like one. They anticipated a showdown with the Roman presence in Jerusalem. Jesus anticipated only a cross.

### I. The King's Preparation (28-34)

<sup>28</sup>After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. <sup>29</sup>As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, <sup>30</sup>"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. <sup>31</sup>If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' tell him, 'The Lord needs it.' "

<sup>32</sup>Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. <sup>33</sup>As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?"

<sup>34</sup>They replied, "The Lord needs it."

## A. Jesus' Time Had Come

From the outset of His ministry, Jesus knew that He had come to die, but not as a victim. On the contrary, Jesus had the authority to lay down His life and to take it up again (John 10:18). This was demonstrated on a number of occasions when He eluded those who desired to kill Him. On one occasion, a crowd intended to seize him, but "... no one laid a hand on him, because his time had not yet come" (John 7:30). Now, His time had come. He had proclaimed the kingdom of God. He had showcased God's power with mighty miracles. He had revealed the mind of God through His teachings. He had revealed the heart of God through His compassion.

Luke speaks of Jesus approaching "Bethphage and Bethany" without going into any detail of significant things that happened in Bethany. John tells us that Jesus spent a few nights in this town where He had earlier raised Lazarus from the dead. This visit ignited great local enthusiasm, and a crowd gathered. There, Jesus was dining in the home of a man named Simon, who had once been a leper, when Mary the sister of Lazarus, anointed the head and feet of Jesus with an expensive jar of perfume. She was criticized for her extravagance, but Jesus commended her and said this needed to be done in preparation for His death. Even as His immediate companions grew more excited about going to Jerusalem in a royal procession, He was trying to tell them that this trip would not initiate a typical coronation week.

## B. A Never Ridden Colt

It was in Bethany that Jesus most likely reflected on His strategy for the week ahead. Somehow, He knew of some disciples in Bethpage who had a brand new donkey colt that had never before been ridden. It has been suggested by some biblical scholars that the fact that this colt that had never been ridden was part of a motif fleshed out by Jesus' birth to a virgin mother and by His burial in a family tomb that had not yet been used. The idea is that each of these, Mary, the colt and the tomb were specially adapted for a sacred purpose. They were holy (not common) vessels for God's anointed One.

A donkey's colt may not seem like a particularly regal mount to those of us centuries removed from that culture. However, depending on the royal agenda, this animal would have been quite appropriate for a king. Had Jesus intended to wage war against Rome, a mighty stallion would have been the beast for the occasion. However, for a king to enter a city on a young donkey to the adoring cheers of a crowd would still reflect kingliness. It would simply mean that this King was on a mission of peace.

## C. "The Lord Needs It"

Jesus told two of His disciples that they would find the colt tied up in the village. They were to take it and bring it to Him. If anyone asked, they were simply to say, "The Lord needs it." Whether these words were a prearranged signal with the owners of the colt or whether Jesus simply knew that the hearts of the colt's owners would respond favorably to His need cannot be determined from the text.

Whether prearranged or spontaneous, it is the simplicity of Jesus' words that I find most striking. The word translated "owners" in verse 33 and the word translated "Lord" in verse 34 are two forms of the same noun. The form used of Jesus, with its definite article, "the Lord," is the same title that the empire used to refer to the emperor. It is also the same name that the Greek translators of the Hebrew Scriptures used to translate *elohim*, ancient Israel's most common name for God Himself. In other words, for any disciple of Jesus, ancient or modern, what we might call "little 'o' ownership" of our stuff must always give way to the "big 'O' Ownership" of Jesus.

In 1959, there was a cranberry scare in the weeks leading up to Thanksgiving. It was alleged that a toxic pesticide had tainted the crop. The company involved admitted no guilt so there was no recall, but people panicked nevertheless. A certain family that typically received a Thanksgiving basket from their church received, in addition to the usual turkey and other items, 57 cans of cranberry sauce. Giving away only what we do not want betrays our blindness to that grasp of God's "Big 'O' ownership" of all things that lies at the heart of Christian stewardship.

Jesus' first claim over us is over our very lives. But, His status as Lord of life really means little if we cannot acknowledge that what we possess is ultimately His. A faithful disciple knows that He cannot hold too tightly to anything that the Lord might require for Him to accomplish His purposes.

## II. The King's Procession (35-40)

<sup>35</sup>They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. <sup>36</sup>As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road.

<sup>37</sup>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:

<sup>38</sup>"Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"

<sup>39</sup>Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!"

<sup>40</sup>"I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."

### A. Who Were All these Celebrants?

Jesus' closest disciples had been with Him since Galilee. The entourage grew at Bethany. It likely grew again at Bethphage when it was reported that Jesus was in route to Jerusalem. The chief priests had already set their sites on bringing about the demise of Jesus, so it would be obvious that something was in the air when it was known that Jesus was heading toward the city. The idea that He was about to present Himself as king in Jerusalem was exhilarating for many.

The chatter had spread into the city. According to John's account, a crowd from within Jerusalem came out to meet the crowd that was with Jesus. These were most likely Galileans (northern Israelites) who had entered the city ahead of Jesus as well as pilgrims from around the world who were caught up in the excitement. There may have been some Jews (southern Israelites from Judea where Jerusalem was located), but many of them were appalled by talk of a *messiah* coming from what they considered "backwoods Galilee." Most Jews distrusted Jesus.

In the absence of expensive purple, the outer garments of the disciples had to suffice as a makeshift saddle. The cloaks of the adoring crowds were spread on the ground before the King. The sincerity of this multitude should not be questioned. However, their misunderstanding of what it would mean for Jesus to be King would render this a very fickle adoration. This multitude that so openly declared their allegiance to Jesus would dwindle in a few days. After His arrest, His closest friends would scatter in fear. Many in this jubilant crowd would be swayed by the charges of the chief priests against Jesus. They will be found only days later among a frenzied mob screaming, "Crucify Him!"

### B. How Truly "Triumphant" Was this Moment?

The messianic hopes of Jerusalem were ablaze as the long-awaited King now rode toward the gates of Jerusalem. But, those same messianic hopes had been ablaze one year earlier when a multitude in Galilee desired to make Jesus "a king by force" (John 6:15) after He miraculously fed them. The crowd sang a song reminiscent to the song of the angels on the night Jesus was born with its emphasis on a king sent by God and with its themes of "peace and glory."

The event certainly appeared triumphant. But, remember, Luke skipped over the details of Jesus' time in Bethany so that he could place this story immediately after a parable that alerts the reader that the kingdom was NOT going to appear immediately. If this event was truly triumphant, it could not be because of the expectations of the celebrants. Those expectations would soon be dashed. The enthusiasm of the crowd would soon turn to horror. The earthly homage of the crowd was proper, albeit uninformed. Jesus was indeed their King, but this earthly sense of triumph would soon fade.

The Red Carpet groupies of Jesus had no idea of what lay between King Jesus and His crown. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem was triumphant and memorable on a higher plane because the Word of God was coming to pass. As the long-awaited *Messiah*, this reception for Jesus was appropriate. However, the human worshippers would quickly retract their praise. But, we are all blessed today because Jesus stayed the Father's course in spite of the fickle worship of this crowd.

I raise this issue for practical reasons. Human nature is pretty much the same as it has always been. These people were not celebrating Jesus as the King He was, but as the king they wanted Him to be. We are called to be subjects of One Who is King. We are called to be stewards of One Who is Lord of all. But, is Christ's Lordship really the basis for our loyalty all the time? Sometimes, we generate great fervor over agendas of our own design without investigating their place in God's design.

A preacher had planned an old-style evangelistic meeting. Many decisions for Christ had been secured in advance. These people had been instructed to sit on the third and fourth pews to leave room for others who may come forward spontaneously. Moved by the moment, one character lost his concentration and stepped forward to make His decision for Christ known. The others broke rank and followed him forward contrary to the plan. The preacher panicked, stepped into the center aisle and waved them back, saying, "Go back! Go back! You're ruining everything!"

Our schemes are fine so long as they harmonize with God's call on our lives. But, if the current goings-on within the modern church seem indifferent to issues of self-denial, authentic sacrifice, deep repentance, the pursuit of purity and the embracing of the world's opposition, can it be said that those goings-on are truly God's agenda for the world? Jesus can still draw a crowd today as is evidenced by the modern mega-church phenomenon and by convention centers filled to capacity featuring the popular TV evangelist *du jour*. But Jesus can also still disperse a crowd when He speaks of crosses and of the cost of discipleship in this shamelessly narcissistic and materialistic culture of modern Christendom. Jerusalem's adoration of Jesus was more about their expectations of Jesus than about Jesus Himself. Often, that is still the case. May that not be the case with our praise.

### **C. One Day, the Stones Would Cry Out**

Certain Pharisees warned Jesus to quiet His followers. These were probably not the rabid Pharisees that bitterly hated Jesus, but rather, the thoughtful ones that gave Him a hearing from time to time. They knew how provocative this celebration was. As the crowd approached Jerusalem from Bethphage, the Citadel of Antonia was clearly in view. This is where the Roman garrison that policed Jerusalem was headquartered. Because these festivals brought thousands of pilgrims into the city and because patriotic passions ran high on such occasions, the Romans would be on high alert and quick to squelch anything that even smacked of rebellion.

Jesus answered, "... if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out." This may have been a colorful way of saying that praise on this occasion simply could not be squelched. Or, Jesus may have had in mind something far more foreboding. This praise would cease. Ultimately, Jerusalem would reject her King. God's judgment would fall four decades later during the reign of the emperor Vespasian when Roman forces under the command of a general named Titus would lay siege to Jerusalem and level her. The devastated ruins of Jerusalem would continue to testify to Who Jesus was and to what might have been avoided, had only His people truly received Him.

### **III. The King's Pity (41-44)**

<sup>41</sup>As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it <sup>42</sup>and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace - but now it is hidden from your eyes. <sup>43</sup>The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. <sup>44</sup>They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you."

#### **A. Jerusalem Just Didn't Get It**

Jesus wept audibly over the judgment that would soon rain down upon the crown city of Israel. He must die for her sins, and she must respond in repentance, but most of Jerusalem would not. Jerusalem might have been God's beacon to the world, not by her own power or might, but by uncompromised loyalty to God. Instead, she was arrogant and hypocritical. The abundant external religion that took place within her walls was just so much whitewash over her moral defilement. God was not fooled, and He would not be mocked. The cost for hypocrisy would be high.

The temple and the system of sacrifice that was housed there would be destroyed and with it, the only means of addressing sin that biblical Judaism has ever known. God provided another way, but His people rejected that "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." It is no wonder that the response of Jesus was not one of angry indignation, but of heart-broken distress.

#### **B. The Savior Still Agonizes over that Which is Lost**

Our present age is being "given over" to its own sins as the culture continues to refuse to acknowledge God and what He has revealed. As Christians, we can play the role of activists, but I suspect that the heart-broken compassion demonstrated in the tears of Jesus will enable us to bear more fruit for the kingdom than will the pressure we place on lawmakers. When God has had enough, He tends to step in and act for Himself. In the meantime, we look more like Jesus when we tenderly speak to people, often one at a time, about their great need for forgiveness and about the Savior Who has already secured it. The tears of King Jesus are the very tears of God whenever He sees the needless pain of those who will not bring themselves to live under His reign.