

WAS THIS REALLY A "TRIUMPHAL ENTRY?"

(Understanding the Events of Palm Sunday)

Passages to Read

Zechariah 9:9; Matthew 21:1-11; Mk.11:1-11; Luke 19:28-44; John 12:12-19

A Special but Misunderstood Day on the Christian Calendar

We tend to celebrate Palm Sunday with loud "Hosannahs" and triumphal processions. That is not entirely inappropriate when we view the events from the perspective of Easter Sunday and the subsequent exaltation of Jesus to the right hand of the Father (Acts 2:31-36; Eph 1:18-23; Heb 1: 3-4). We know he is both Savior and King. But by describing this as the Triumphal Entry (the caption that appears in our Bibles), we may obscure the significance of the event. It was undoubtedly a unique and, in some respects, a decisive day, a fulfillment of prophecy (Zech 9:9; Luke 19:41-42). Speaking of Jerusalem Jesus said, "If you, even you, had only known *on this day* what would bring you peace, but now it is hidden from you" (Lk.19:42). This special day inaugurated the last, all-important week in the life of Jesus - a week of conflict and pathos that culminated in the crucifixion and resurrection.

A Matter of Timing

Up to this point Jesus had downplayed his messiahship. Yes, he did make some clear messianic claims but these were usually in private. He kept telling people whom he healed not to make too much fuss. To the leper he gave a strong warning: "See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them (Mk. 1:44). He silenced demons when they tried to identify him. "He would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was" (Mk. 1:34). There was the time when some of the people wanted to take him and make him king by force but he withdrew to a mountain by himself (Jn. 6:15). He had deliberately left Jerusalem early in his ministry and concentrated his ministry in Galilee. When he did go up to the city, he made lightning visits and entered quietly. His brothers urged him to go up publicly but he responded, "The right time for me has not yet come" (Jn. 7:6, 8).

In fact, the "timing motif" plays an important role in his ministry. He carefully avoided bringing things to a head. When his mother approached him to do something at the wedding reception in Cana, he replied, "Dear woman, why do you involve me? My time has not yet come" (Jn. 2:4). At the Feast of Tabernacles they

sought to seize him but no-one laid a hand on him because his time had not yet come (John 7:30). Do you remember how he commenced his high priestly prayer just before he went to Gethsemane? - "Father, the time has come..." (Jn. 17:1).

When the right time did arrive there was a definite change of approach. Luke tells us that "as the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem" (Lk. 9:51). He set out for the city, never to return to Galilee.

The Momentous "Journey"

We take up the account with Jesus in Bethany, just a few kilometres from Jerusalem. Bethany was perched on a rocky plateau on the Mount of Olives. Being on the eastern slope, Bethany itself was just over the hill out of sight of Jerusalem. After the Sabbath day, the Sunday morning is spent in quietness. Jesus and the disciples set out for Jerusalem along the pathway that led over the Mount. People from the village were accompanying him. There was considerable excitement. Not long before, Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead and this had caused quite a stir. People were interested in seeing this man who had been dead for four days but was now alive. Some of the leaders actually wanted to put Lazarus to death because of the attention he was attracting.

En route Jesus must pass another village called Bethphage. As he approached it, he sent two of his disciples with an interesting instruction. As they entered Bethphage they would find a colt which no one had ever ridden. They were to untie it and bring it to him. When questioned they were to say simply, "The Lord needs it and will send it back shortly."

Bear in mind that everything was happening very fast. The disciples didn't quite understand what was going on. They were accustomed to accompanying Jesus and being caught up in a whirlwind of events. They had learned to listen to his instructions even when they didn't know where this was leading them.

All the time the crowd was swelling. As they approached the city, the excitement was mounting. The disciples had laid their cloaks on the colt. And Jesus was now seated upon it. Spontaneously some of the pilgrims had taken off their cloaks and laid them before him on the dusty road. Others had run into the fields and torn off palm branches to form a carpet as he approached.

The crowd began to chant and shout. Their initial shouts were from Psalm 118, the last Psalm of the Great Hallel (Psalms 113-118), used on Feast days to welcome pilgrims and to celebrate God's salvation. Soon they were saying more:

Hosanna!
 Hosanna to the Son of David
 Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord
 Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!
 Blessed is the King of Israel
 Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!
 Hosanna in the highest.

As they rounded the slope on the northern side of the Mount of Olives, the entire city would have come into view. Across the Kidron Valley was the magnificent sight of Jerusalem "the golden," shimmering in the afternoon sun. The skyline was dominated by the imposing Temple. From that vantage point, the city would have looked so serene and so secure. News had reached the city and people were pouring out of the gate. Not far from the entrance to the city the two "processions" would have met. The noise would have intensified. The proceedings, marked by spontaneity and an overflow of jubilant praise, were being orchestrated by a higher hand. The King had come to his city. This, quite rightly, was a day of rejoicing. On *this day*, silence was not an option.

But not everybody was happy. The indignant Pharisees understood that no man should receive this kind of acclaim and adulation and appealed to Jesus to silence his disciples. "Teacher," they said, "Rebuke your disciples!" Jesus' response was appropriate on this day, this special day: "I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out" (Luke 19:40). The Pharisees were heard to lament, "Look, the whole world has gone out after him."

A little over half way down the slope of the Mount of Olives, Jesus stopped and wept over the city. Luke uses a word that describes loud and intense lamentation. At the tomb of his friend Lazarus Jesus had shed tears. Here he cried aloud with deep grief for the city he loved.

Before his eyes he could see another city. In terrible contrast, he saw the city with a relentless enemy encamped around it. The city was leveled, not one stone left upon another, the gory bodies of her children scattered among the ruins. With loud sobs, he lamented over the city: "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace - but now it is hidden from your eyes. The days will come when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you" (Lk. 19:42-44).

The events of this day set the scene for the entire week. John tells us that not even Jesus disciples understood what was going on. "Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him" (Jn. 12:16). If *they* did not understand the import of the events, it is most unlikely that the other pilgrims did. This happened in fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9

Rejoice greatly,
O Daughter of Zion!
Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem!
See, your King comes to you,
righteous and having salvation,
Gentle and riding on a donkey,
On a colt, the foal of a donkey.

The procession streamed into the city through the narrow streets up the Temple Mount. The tramp of their feet and the shout of their acclamation would have brought many more people into the streets and onto the housetops. The city was shaken and from mouth to mouth the question was asked, "Who *is* this?" The answer given was accurate as far as it went, but it did not tell the whole story: "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

The mob was jubilant and excited. But how did Jesus feel? He would have been silent and sad - the stains of the tears he had wept over Jerusalem still on his cheeks.

On Good Friday we shall pause at the cross and marvel at God's love for us. On Sunday we shall be looking into an empty tomb and saying:

If, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life (Rom. 5:10-11).

Today, let's join the throng and say,

Hosanna!
Hosanna to the Son of David
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord
Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!
Blessed is the King of Israel
Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!
Hosanna in the highest.

In fact we can praise not just as excited pilgrims but as recipients of the salvation he has brought. We know he is Messiah. We know he is King. We know that his reign is to be far more extensive than was envisaged. We do not just say, "Hosanna; Lord save us." We are able to say, "Thank you Lord for having saved us!"

SO WHAT?

1. To our knowledge this is the only occasion on which Jesus rode into Jerusalem. We know that Jesus made lightning visits to Jerusalem, but he would have walked into the city, avoiding attention. Here his entry was intentionally public. Why?
2. Why do you think he rode a donkey (a colt) into the city?
3. The Gospel writers make quite a big deal of the fact that the Lord borrowed the colt. Could there be some significance in that fact? (Had they not given us this detail, it would not really have affected the flow of the story). Any ideas?
4. Why a donkey and not a steed?
5. Do you think the disciples understood what was happening?
6. What caused the crowd to lay their cloaks and palm branches on the road?
7. When Jesus said that if those shouting "Hosanna" and heralding his coming kept silent the stones would cry out. Why would he say such a thing?
8. Why did he weep over the city on a day when there was such spontaneous praise and acclaim?
9. Was this a "triumphal entry?" In what sense?
10. What does this event tell us about Jesus?

NOW WHAT?

This is one of those events in which a forced application would be unhelpful. We need to appreciate this event as a vital part of the Lord's ministry. To draw lessons from it by identifying with the Lord (humility and compassion), the crowds (spontaneous praise), or the donkey (bearing the Messiah) plunges us into absurdity. Let's just appreciate the account in preparation for Easter.

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