

Sermon, April 10, 2022

Luke 19: 28-40
"Passion Week"

Today is Palm Sunday, the beginning of Passion Week, which begins with Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem. In Luke's version of the story Jesus instructs two of his disciples to go into the village ahead, and find a colt, that is the colt of a donkey, and to bring it back to him. This is actually a reference to a verse in the ninth chapter of the Book of Zechariah, which reads, "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." It's interesting that the king is depicted as both triumphant/victorious, and humble.

The colt is important, because, although there are those who are calling for Jesus to be proclaimed king of Israel, in the Gospel of John, he is not the sort of king they were expecting. Some of the Jews were expecting the coming Messiah to be of a military sort. If that were the case, then Jesus would have ridden in on a horse. In the symbolism of the day a king on a horse would be symbolic of war, whereas a donkey would symbolize peace. Others were expecting the messiah to be of a priestly class. Jesus didn't really fit either category.

Notice that in Luke the people spread their cloaks on the ground, and in Matthew and Mark they cast both cloaks and branches. Both would have indicated they were honoring a special person, with the cloaks, in particular, having to do with a person of royalty. The palm in Roman culture was a symbol of triumph and victory, this would carry over into Christian culture. At a later point in the development of Christian tradition, the Palm would become a symbol of martyrs, referring to their triumph and victory over death.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem takes place right after the raising of Lazarus from the dead. In fact, it says that many in the crowd greeting him in Jerusalem were those who had either witnessed or heard of that miracle. Unfortunately, many of these same people who were crying out, "Hosanna", would later in the week, be the same people, crying out "Crucify him!". Those who had been so excited about the raising of Lazarus, were certainly unaware of another rising from the dead just a few days later, but I think John was drawing a parallel, or a connection between the two.

A few days after Jesus came riding into Jerusalem, he would gather together his disciples for what we call the Last Supper. But before the meal there is a scene where Jesus washes the feet of each of the disciples. This was a common act of hospitality, welcoming guests who had journeyed in sandals on dusty roads. However, it was not the host who would perform this act, but a slave, or, the disciples would do it for their teachers. Jesus reverses the act, which, I

believe, ties into his riding in on a donkey. Both speak of the humility found in Jesus, but, also, symbolic of his servanthood, which we are called to emulate. In the Gospel of John, right after the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus says to the disciples, Andrew and Phillip, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified". The glorification he is talking about is not the greeting he received at the city gates, but, rather, his coming death and resurrection. But I think the humility exhibited by the donkey and the foot washing should also be seen as part of that glorification. He is glorified as a servant of the world. He then goes on to speak of the reason for his death and resurrection, saying, "Very truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit".

What is the fruit he is talking about? Well, a little further on he says, "when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself". Being lifted up from the earth obviously refers to his crucifixion. On the cross, suspended between heaven and earth, he becomes the grain of wheat that dies. Then those who are drawn to him become the fruit, in the form of his followers. Notice, not just believers, but followers. He says, "whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor."

When he says, "whoever serves me must follow me", means that we must also become like the grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies, but not in the sense that we must die physically, but that we die to self, meaning that self-centeredness gives way to service to him through service to others.

In each of the Synoptic gospels, i.e., Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus' triumphal entry is quickly followed by his cleansing of the temple. Upon entering the temple, he sees the money changers and merchants at work, and he begins driving them out, exclaiming, "It is written, "My house shall be a house of prayer; but you have made it a den of robbers." Saying it is written "my house shall be a house of prayer", he is actually quoting the prophet Isaiah. Calling it a den of robbers draws from Jeremiah. But what these people were doing was not really wrong. Jerusalem was a crossroads for merchants, and currencies had to be exchanged for those from other places, and doves, and other items needed to be sold for sacrifices in the temple, had to be purchased. Jesus' objection was not what they were doing, but where they were doing it. He saw it as taking away from the sacredness of the place. But whatever his reasons may have been, it is most likely that his action was what broke the camel's back, so to speak, for his enemies, who then decided it was time for him to be "lifted up". In other words, it was time for him to die!

We will attend to the next part of this Passion week story on Maundy Thursday!
Amen.

Let us pray: O God, who in Jesus Christ triumphantly entered Jerusalem, heralding a week of pain and sorrow, be with us now as we follow the way of the cross. In these events of defeat and victory, you have sealed the closeness of death and resurrection, of humiliation and exaltation. We thank you for these branches that promise to become for us symbols of martyrdom and majesty. Bless them and us that their use this day may announce in our time that Christ has come and now is in the midst of us. Amen.