

Luke 19:28-40 (NRSV)

Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem

²⁸After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

²⁹When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, ³⁰saying, "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. ³¹If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" ³²So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. ³³As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" ³⁴They said, "The Lord needs it." ³⁵Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. ³⁶As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. ³⁷As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, 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, ³⁸saying,

"Blessed is the king
who comes in the name of the Lord!
Peace in heaven,
and glory in the highest heaven!"

³⁹Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." ⁴⁰He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."



"I Didn't Expect That!"

Today is Palm Sunday, the day on which Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the back of a young donkey. Palm Sunday has been described by Christians for generations as Jesus' "triumphal entry into Jerusalem." But, have you ever asked yourself, "If this was a triumphal entry, then why did they crucify Jesus at the end of the week?"

It seems that we have a problem today that we need to address. If this is such a glorious Sunday for all Christians, **what goes wrong by Friday** that Jesus will find himself betrayed by one of his own disciples, arrested by the high priest's guard, accused by a coalition of religious leaders, tried by the Roman governor, and sentenced to die the death of a common criminal—death by crucifixion?

You might not know that Jesus’ procession into Jerusalem was not the only parade the city saw that day. In the year 30 AD, Roman historians record that the governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, led a procession of Roman cavalry and centurions into the city of Jerusalem. (*The Last Week*, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, p.1)

Imagine the spectacle of **that** entry. From the western side of the city, the opposite side from which Jesus enters, Pontius Pilate leads Roman soldiers on horseback and on foot. Each soldier was clad in leather armor polished to a high gloss. On each centurion’s head, hammered helmets gleamed in the bright sunlight. At their sides were swords crafted from the hardest steel; and, in their hands, each centurion carried a spear; or if he was an archer, a bow with a quiver of arrows across his back. And drummers beat out the cadence of march. For this was no ordinary entry into Jerusalem. Pilate knew it was standard practice for the Roman governor to be present for religious celebrations. It was the beginning of Passover, a Jewish festival that the Romans allowed. However, the Romans were aware that this festival celebrated the liberation of the Jews from another empire, the empire of Egypt.

So, Pilate had to be in Jerusalem. Since the Romans had occupied this land by defeating the Jews and deposing their king about 80 years before, uprisings were always in the air. The last major uprising had been after the death of Herod the Great in 4 BC. After putting down that rebellion, the Romans marched on Jerusalem, where they crucified over 2,000 Jews who were accused of being part of the rebellion. The Romans had made their intolerance for rebellion well-known. And so on this occasion, Pilate had traveled with a contingent of Rome’s finest from his preferred headquarters in Caesarea-by-the-Sea, to the stuffy, crowded, provincial capital of the Jews ~ Jerusalem.

The Temple would be the center of Passover activity. Antonia’s Fortress, the Roman garrison built adjacent to the Temple compound, would serve as a good vantage point from which to keep an eye on the Jews. Pilate’s entry into Jerusalem was meant to send a message to the Jews, and to those who might be plotting against the empire of Rome. The spectacle was meant to remind the Jews of what had happened the last time of a wide-scale uprising. And, it was meant to intimidate the citizens of Jerusalem themselves, who might think twice about joining such a rebellion.

But I said this was a day of two processions, so let’s get back to Jesus and his entry into Jerusalem. If Pilate’s procession was meant as a show of military might and strength, **Jesus’ procession was meant to show the opposite**. The Gospel writers record Jesus’s own words, as he instructs his disciples to go in to the city and find a colt tied up. When asked what they are doing, they are to say that “the Lord needs it.” All this is to fulfill the prophesy in Zechariah 9: *‘See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.’*

But, there is more to this passage than just a description of Jesus’ means of transportation for that day. The prophet Zechariah is speaking to the nation. In [Zechariah 9](#), the prophet reassures the people of Judea that God has not forgotten them. In other words, Jesus’ quote from the prophet Zechariah reminded those who heard him of the entire passage. The message they heard was, “God will deliver the nation from the oppressor”—in this case, Rome!

But, the king they seek will come to them humbly, not on a steed of war, but on a slow-moving donkey, the symbol of a king who comes in peace, according to Zechariah.

The two processions could not be more different in the messages they convey. **Pilate**, leading Roman centurions, asserts the power and might of the empire of Rome which crushes all who oppose it. **Jesus**, riding on a young donkey, embodies the peace and tranquility that God brings. And the people will have a choice as to which kind of leader will gain their allegiance.

But there is another problem. In their book titled, ***Leadership on the Line***, the authors Marty Linsky and Ron Heifetz define leadership this way:

“Leadership is about disappointing your own people at a rate they can absorb.”

So, Jesus has another problem. Of course, his followers and others who get caught up in his entry into Jerusalem think they are choosing to follow Jesus. But by the end of the week, Jesus will have disappointed the crowd at a rate faster than they can stand. They will turn on him. Even those closest to Jesus, the 12 disciples, will either betray him outright, or abandon him in confusion and fear.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus had disappointed and alienated powerful people. He did so because the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the chief priest, the scribes, most of the Levitical priests, and others who ruled on Rome’s behalf, were part of the same system of oppression and domination that Pilate was part of.

Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem may or may not have been planned to occur on the same day as Pilate’s procession through the western gate of the city. Whether it was planned or not, the two processions, the kings and kingdoms, provided a contrast that was unmistakable. And, although many of the common people thought they sided with Jesus, they did so for the same reasons the Pharisees and others sided with Rome. They thought Jesus could do for them what Rome had **not** done—make their lives better, deliver them from the oppressive system under which they lived and worked, and turn the tables of power and authority.

That’s why the crowd turns on Jesus by the end of the week. They don’t think he’s going to do any of those things. And, in addition, Jesus is going to make life worse for them, not better. Their religious leaders, all of them, who never agree on anything, agree that Jesus is going to attract the attention of the Roman empire, especially during Passover, and Rome will come down fast and hard on the entire nation. So, when Jesus is accused, when

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he is brought by Pilate before the angry mobs, they want to be rid of him. Jesus, in their minds, never did what they wanted him to do. He never defeated the Romans, he never dissolved the unfair tax system, he never put common people in charge of the government, and he probably never would.

To appease the crowds that swelled the city of Jerusalem, Pilate had the custom of releasing prisoners, many of whom were political prisoners. But on this last week in the life of Jesus, Pilate offers the crowd a choice between Barabbas, a known robber, and Jesus, a failed Messiah. Fearing that if Jesus were released, he would start all over again, the crowd begged for Barabbas to be released, and for Jesus to be executed. And not just by any means, “Crucify him” was the cry. Because crucifixion was the one form of capital punishment that would show Rome the Jews were completely loyal, and **would humiliate Jesus, even in death.**

But, I’m getting ahead of the story of this week, a story which we will conclude next Sunday. For one moment, ask yourself, “If I had been in Jerusalem that day, and had seen both processions passing by, which would I have chosen to follow?” We need to ask that question because that is the choice we make each day: To choose power and might over love and hope; To choose “the way things are done” over “the way God intends them to be.” Which would you choose? What kind of messiah do you expect?