

THE COMING OF THE KING

By Steve Zeisler

Americans experience presidential inaugurations in our nation's capital every four years. They are gala events, expressions of national pride. All three branches of government are focused on the inauguration of an American president, and there are bands, banners, television coverage, and so on. But times change for presidents. I remember all the pomp and circumstance in January 1977 when Jimmy Carter was inaugurated into office. Now he's a Sunday School teacher. He speaks to civic groups and builds houses for poor people. He's the same man, but he doesn't occupy the same office.

Historically there have been gaudier coronations. An emperor would conquer a land and then march his army, with grim visage and polished armor, into conquered capital cities to take over. Enemies would be terrified, maidens would swoon, and allies would preen as the proud emperor astride a mighty horse entered the city. We can think of the triumph of a Roman general given a parade in his honor in Rome. There are events of a similar nature all through history.

A DIFFERENT SORT OF CORONATION

The passage before us, Luke 19:28-42, is the story of the greatest coronation of all. It was for the most remarkable human sovereign who ever existed, one who would not pass out of office like American presidents, who would not depend on a violent army for his authority. It was for the King of kings, the Lord of heaven, God become human, the Authority over all authority. Jesus himself, the Son of God, entered his capital city amidst royal proclamation on the first Palm Sunday. This was the greatest day of his earthly life: the coming of the Messiah to the capital city of the nation that should bless all the nations of the earth. Yet there was nothing of armies with polished armor. The steed he rode was not a war stallion, but the foal of a donkey, which is an animal of peace. Ordinary people led his way. And as we'll see in a moment, there was as much misunderstanding as clarity about this event. Let's read the account of the triumphal entry:

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

Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. And as they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?"

They replied, "The Lord needs it."

They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. As he went along, the people spread their cloaks on the road.

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 the miracles they had seen:

"Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!"

"I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out."

As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city he wept over it 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."

Jesus had made prior arrangement with a follower in the environs of the Mount of Olives to use his colt on this day. He did that because he knew that he was to fulfill Zechariah 9:9-10:

"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.

I will take away the chariots from Ephraim

and the war-horses from Jerusalem,

and the battle bow will be broken.

He will proclaim peace to the nations.

His rule will extend from sea to sea

and from the River to the ends of the earth."

The prophet predicted that there would come a day when the greater son of David, the King whom David foreshadowed, would come into the city, not as every other leader did, defeating his enemies, but winning them. The ancient peoples were familiar with win-lose politics. In order for one nation to be great, another had to be downtrodden. In order for one group to accrue success and power and financial advantage, another had to pay the price. But when Israel's king rode into his city and came for his people, he would come as a gentle Savior. He would come to bless not only his people but everyone. That was the wonderful promise.

THE DISAPPOINTMENT OF THE DAY

So here was the day of the fulfillment of that prophecy. But at the end of the day nothing had changed. Peace had not been extended to the ends of the earth, and it has not happened yet. Jesus entered his city just as it had been foretold, but the Romans remained in control of the nation. The idolatrous soldiers who made up the Roman army continued to do their wicked and hard-hearted worst; they would execute this King before the week was over.

On this day hopes were dashed and possibilities went unrealized for Jesus' followers. The problem was that they were focused on the wrong things. Just shortly before this, James and John had been seeking the number 1 and number 2 positions in Jesus' kingdom (Mark 10:35-45). They were filled with visions of their own greatness. Sometime before that, Peter had rebuked the Lord for describing the suffering he would undergo. The disciples were so focused on what benefit would come to them that they didn't understand any of what Jesus was doing. Tellingly, this account describes the disciples as running errands and saddling donkeys, not marching in places of honor.

The third thing we might observe is the large crowd singing hosannas at the top of their lungs in a swelling chorus of enthusiasm. If you compare the synoptic gospels (the passage before us; Matthew 21:1-11; and Mark 11:1-10) with John's gospel (12:12-18), it makes the nature of this crowd even more impressive. Evidently a large number of followers were coming with him from the Mount of Olives where he had been staying overnight. They were putting their cloaks down on the road and following him along. And there was another whole group in the city that had been waiting in the temple every day. They had heard about how Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, and rumors were everywhere that the Messiah had come, and God was at work. Then they heard news that he was marching down the Mount of Olives. So this whole crowd poured out of the city to join the crowd that was coming with him. There was a great throng of people. Matthew tells us that later when he was in the temple, probably the next day, children were prominent among them. It was a great, spontaneous outpouring.

But it was a crowd, as I already mentioned, that was extremely shallow. The same vocal cords with which they praised God for Jesus' entry to Jerusalem would be used just a few days hence to scream, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" These same people would soon turn against him and would long for his death. The disciples, who were hoping for greatness, would abandon him in his hour of need. All of the energy that went into praise would dissipate.

Once again, at the end of the day we find ourselves more sad than anything else. The prophet made a promise and it didn't come true. The disciples wished for greatness and became errand boys. The crowd sang his praise and didn't change.

It's interesting to listen to Jesus' response to his enemies among the Pharisees, who said, "Shut these people up! Rebuke them--they're calling you the Messiah!" Jesus didn't actually defend the crowd. He didn't say, "No, these are God-honoring servants

of the Lord who are speaking these words of praise with great insight." What he did say was, "It is impossible that I will enter Jerusalem as its King and not have praises sung to me. And these are as good as any--but if necessary the rocks would do as well."

In many respects those in the crowd were celebrity-seekers more than worshipers. They had heard of the miracles. Lazarus had been dead for four days and was alive. He was sort of a secondary celebrity, and Jesus was a greater celebrity. It would be kind of like having the Spice Girls come to Palo Alto, or an Elvis sighting, or the face of Jesus in a rust spot on the side of a refrigerator. There are many ways you can gather people together with celebrity enthusiasm. What they said was marvelous, but by the end of the day the show was over.

The last thing to note is the tears of Jesus. There were joyful shouts on every side, and only one person was crying--the Lord as he looked at his city and realized that they were going to miss this opportunity. There was going to come a day when Jerusalem would lose itself. It would be razed to the ground, its people killed. And he could see all that and he knew that they did not understand where peace came from. They were blind to what they were doing, and in the long run hearts were not changed. This was the most extraordinary missed opportunity of all.

However, we're going to finish this Palm Sunday on a note of praise. There is another Sunday coming, and it's because of what happened then that we can sing hosanna from the heart. We can be remade by the events of Good Friday and Easter so that our praise lasts forever.

THE LAST BATTLE

Remember the story of the lame man who spent thirty-eight years at the Pool of Bethesda (John 5:2-15). Jesus asked him, "Do you want to get well?" The man explained, "Periodically an angel comes and stirs the water. And when that happens, the lucky first person in the water gets to be changed, but everybody else loses out. And I've been waiting thirty-eight years hoping to be the first person to get in the water when it bubbles up the next time."

It struck me that this is almost a parable of the kind of religion that has only Palm Sunday and not Good Friday and Easter. Occasionally God does some stirring thing. There may be a spasm of religious response, hopes and possibilities, a splash of enthusiasm, but nobody ever really changes except maybe one or two. We have a revival meeting, but the next day everybody's as crippled as they were before.

In order for real, eternal, new life to happen in the heart, the King who entered Jerusalem was going to have to fight one more battle. He didn't enter his royal city having won all the battles. He came as a warrior, a champion, to engage the last enemy for us. The Scriptures say the last enemy is death. The reign of sin and death had not been broken. There was no power for people, even those who sang hosanna, to be different. And as long as sin reigned and death owned the hearts of people everywhere, the royal coronation would mean nothing. Nations would not be free of tyranny. Disciples would not be made great.

Jesus regarded James and John's desire for greatness as a good thing. That's what God made us for. But how do disciples of Jesus become great, mature, worthy servants of God? Something has to change on the inside. The reign of death and the power of sin need to be broken. On Palm Sunday that didn't happen. The people's was hope without substance; it was energy without reality.

We praise God not because of Palm Sunday, but because of Easter Sunday. And what I hope you will do is walk with Christ through Holy Week. Follow him in your Bible as he cleansed the temple, told challenging parables, spoke of the second coming, met with his disciples in the upper room, preached his farewell sermon, prayed his high priestly prayer, gave himself to the awful determination of Roman soldiers, let himself be tried in a mock trial without defending himself, allowed them to drive nails into his hands, finally gave up his life, and was laid in a cold tomb, abandoned by everyone.

It's because of what he did for us on that Friday, and what the Father did for us in giving him life and victory again, that we have the opportunity to be great as disciples. We know someday there's going to be peace. The end of the story hasn't been told yet. We can sing words of praise that won't be replaced the next day by words of hatred. Our thanks to God can live forever. Because of Easter, we can sing the praises of Palm Sunday today and mean them.

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