



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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The King Who Comes in the Name of the Lord

Luke 19:28-40

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Think of the drive from here up to Mount Washington. It's a beautiful route that winds through the trees as it makes its way up the mountain. In some places it's very steep. At the top of the ski slope you're about 1500 metres above the Comox Valley, but the lodge at the top of the Strathcona Parkway sits at about 1000 metres above sea level. That's about the difference in elevation between Jericho and Jerusalem.

In Luke 18 and 19 we've seen Jesus at Jericho. He healed Blind Bartimaeus as he made his way through the crowd at the city gate. On his way through the city he met Zacchaeus and called him down from the tree so that they could have lunch together. And as the people grumbled about it, Jesus told them a parable about a king who left servants in charge of his money while he went on a long trip to receive his crown. When he came back he found that some of his servants had managed his money well, investing it and making more, while at least one of them simply hid it away to keep it safe. The king rewarded the wise servants who understood his values and priorities by putting them in places of authority in his kingdom. The servant who didn't share his values and priorities lost everything. The parable was a rebuke of the people who grumbled that Jesus would embrace a traitorous tax collector like Zacchaeus. Yes, they kept the law—or they thought they did. They were circumcised, they ate the right food, they made the right sacrifices, they kept themselves clean by avoiding gentiles. But in treating the *torah*, the

Lord's law, that way, they were like the servant who hid the king's coin away in a handkerchief for safe keeping. Yes, they kept it shiny and new, but that wasn't the point. The Lord had called his people to be a light and a blessing to the nations. But Israel had taken the coin, the light, the blessing and hid it away. In the Lord's absence, Israel waited and prayed for centuries that the Lord would return to Zion. On that day, they hoped, he would vindicate Israel for having kept the coin, the light, the blessing safe from the nations and he would smite the nations and make them pay for their evil and their darkness. But in the parable Jesus warns: The Lord didn't give you the light to keep it to yourself; he gave it to you to share with the world. Keeping it to yourself, condemning those in darkness, and praying for their judgement shows and that you don't understand the Lord's priorities and values. And if you don't understand the Lord's priorities and values, his return to Zion won't be what you expect. It will be a day of darkness for you, not light. The kingdom is for those—for people like Zacchaeus—who understand the King and his values and who will invest themselves in it. If all you're going to do is hide the Lord's gifts in a handkerchief, if you're going to hide your light under a basket, the Lord will take his kingdom away from you.

Luke writes that Jesus said all of this because the people were really starting to accept that he was the Messiah and that he was going to establish the kingdom. He didn't meet all their expectations, but many of them really were starting to believe that in Jesus the Lord was returning to Zion. They were getting their hopes up: The Lord will finally reward us and he'll finally smite our enemies. But their priorities were wrong. In Jesus they had the *right king*, but they were envisaging the *wrong kingdom*.

And now from Jericho, Jesus sets out on the last bit of the journey to go up to Jerusalem. That's how the people

always talked about that journey: going *up* to Jerusalem. Jerusalem is in the mountains of Judea. It was especially "up" from Jericho—as I said, about the same change in elevation between here and the lodge on Mt. Washington. Jericho is in an oasis near the Dead Sea—the lowest spot on earth. From there Jesus and his disciples, along with the crowds and crowds of people on their way to celebrate Passover, marched up the steep and winding road into the mountains, through the Judean desert—one of the driest places on earth. Imagine walking with thousands of people up Mt. Washington—except that the road isn't paved and everything is dry as a bone. A cloud of dust surrounds the crowd of people walking up the mountain in the hot sun. And yet they weren't going to a funeral; they were on their way to Passover—the biggest festival of the year. As they went they sang from the book of Psalms and especially the psalms we know as the "Psalms of Ascent". They would have been singing things like:

**I was glad when they said to me,
"Let us go to the house of the
LORD!"** (Psalm 122:1)

**Our help is in the name of the
LORD,
who made heaven and earth.**
(Psalm 124:8)

**I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the LORD
more than watchmen for the
morning,
more than watchmen for the
morning.**

**O Israel, hope in the LORD!
For with the LORD there is
steadfast love,
and with him is plentiful
redemption.** (Psalm 130:5-7)

**For the LORD has chosen Zion;
he has desired it for his dwelling
place:
"This is my resting place forever;**

here I will dwell, for I have desired it.

I will abundantly bless her provisions;

I will satisfy her poor with bread.

Her priests I will clothe with salvation,

and her saints will shout for joy.

There I will make a horn to sprout for David;

I have prepared a lamp for my anointed.

His enemies I will clothe with shame,

but on him his crown will shine.” (Psalm 132:13-18)

Some of these were psalms about going up to Jerusalem and to the temple, but many of them were also psalms about the Lord’s promise not to forget his people and about his choice of Zion for his dwelling place.

But even as the people sang these psalms on the way to the city, more important was the story-telling. Passover was the annual commemoration of Israel’s rescue from Egypt: of the slaughtered lambs and the angel of death sparing the firstborn of the Israelites. It was about being trapped by the Egyptian army at the Red Sea and about the Lord parting the waters to lead the people to freedom and safety. It was about exodus from slavery. These were the things the people were focused on. These were the stories they told their children as they made the hot, dusty journey up the mountain. And travelling with them, now, is Jesus. In Jesus the Lord really is returning to Zion. Jesus is preparing to lead the people in a new exodus, not from Egyptian slavery this time, but from slavery to sin and death. He’s been fulfilling the words of the Old Testament prophets all through his ministry, but as he gets to Jerusalem it’s all going to be become more obvious and more dramatic because both his ministry and Israel’s story are reaching their climax. More and more

people are starting to see the prophets fulfilled in Jesus, and so Jesus now begins to make a point of *deliberately* acting out these old prophecies. Up to this point it was a more vague fulfilment of preaching good news, bringing release, and giving healing. Now Jesus gets much more specific. Look at Luke 19:28-33.

And when he had said these things, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. When he drew near to Bethphage and Bethany, at the mount that is called Olivet, he sent two of the disciples, saying, “Go into the village in front of you, where on entering you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever yet sat. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ you shall say this: ‘The Lord has need of it.’” So those who were sent went away and found it just as he had told them. And as they were untying the colt, its owners said to them, “Why are you untying the colt?”

The road from Jericho approaches Jerusalem from the east. The scenery becomes greener—especially in the spring, at Passover—and the road crests over the Mount of Olives. From there you can see across the deep Kidron Valley to Jerusalem, which sits on its own mountain on the opposite side. Both Bethpage and Bethany sit on the eastern side of the Mount of Olives, just before the road reaches the top. Jesus stopped there to get ready for the final leg of the journey. For him, the trip down into the valley and back up into Jerusalem was a royal journey. He was going to his throne—even though he wasn’t going as anyone expected. But he needed to highlight this again and he does it by acting out an Old Testament prophecy. This is what the donkey is all about. Kings ride in procession; they don’t walk. And yet Jesus isn’t the usual kind of king and he’s not the kind of king the people expected—but he is the King foretold by the prophets.

The people on the road knew the prophets and as they travelled they were talking about and recalling the prophets and their promises. That’s part of what the psalm-singing was all about. And so Jesus deliberately acts out a prophecy that had been given through Zechariah:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!

Behold, your king is coming to you;

righteous and having salvation is he,

humble and mounted on a donkey,

on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim

and the war horse from

Jerusalem;

and the battle bow shall be cut off,

and he shall speak peace to the nations;

his rule shall be from sea to sea,

and from the River to the ends of the earth. (Zechariah 9:9-10)

The people were looking for a king like David, riding into Jerusalem in his chariot or on a great warhorse, to drive out the Romans. People had started calling Jesus the “Son of David” and Jesus claimed that title, but the images it conjured up in the minds of the people...that’s not the kind of king Jesus knew he was to be.

It’s also important to remember that there was another procession into Jerusalem that week. Some people suspect that Jesus may have timed his procession deliberately to coincide with this other procession: Jesus entering Jerusalem from the east and Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, entering from the west. Pilate’s usual seat was in Caesarea on the Mediterranean Sea. He had no interest in Passover, but every year at Passover he and his troops would make the

journey up to Jerusalem, along with all the Jewish pilgrims, to reinforce the Roman garrison there. As far as Pilate was concerned the Jews were troublemakers and at Passover they were particularly prone not only to anti-Roman sentiments, but to looking for messiahs who would oppose the Romans. And so he and his men rode into Jerusalem too, from the opposite side, on their great horses, maybe in chariots too, and in procession with the banners and eagles of imperial Rome, no doubt with spear-wielding soldiers roughly pushing people off the road to make way for Caesar's representative.

Again, Jesus does just the opposite. He's not the kind of king people thought of when they thought of the Messiah. And he wasn't the kind of king people thought of when they looked to Caesar. To show the people the kind of king he was Jesus decided to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey. Considering how deliberate Jesus is about everything that he does over the next few days, I suspect that he had arranged in advance for the donkey. If he didn't, there wasn't anything unusual about finding a donkey in the town and asking to use it. Donkeys were available for hire—the way we rent cars—and especially so at Passover, so it wouldn't have been hard for the disciples to go into Bethany or Bethphage and find a donkey. Whoever owned the donkey knew who Jesus was. He was most likely a disciple and friend of Jesus and gladly let him borrow it.

When the disciples got back from the town with the donkey in tow, Jesus climbed on. The disciples knew the prophecy. It didn't take them long to figure out what Jesus was doing and so they played their parts in this acted out prophecy. Look at verses 36-38.

And as he rode along, they spread their cloaks on the road. As he was drawing near—already on the way down the Mount of Olives—the

whole multitude of his disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen, saying, “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”

Pretty soon everyone was joining in. Again, think of the crowds of people on their way to Jerusalem for Passover. Hundreds and probably thousands of people had been travelling the road with Jesus. Many of them had been with him for a long way and certainly since Jericho. They'd seen the blind man healed. They'd heard him talk about the soon coming of the kingdom. They didn't really understand and the fact that Jesus was on a simple, humble donkey didn't make sense—it didn't fit their expectations, but they were desperate for deliverance and hungry for the Lord's return and so they joined in the procession down into the valley and back up the other side to the gates of Jerusalem. Luke only mentions the cloaks being laid in the road before Jesus, but Matthew, Mark, and John all mention the people waving palm branches and laying them in the road too. In one sense, the people grabbed what was at hand—big, leafy, green branches—to wave in celebration, but it also goes back to another historical event.

Two hundred years before Jesus began his ministry the Jews were living under the occupation of the Syrians and under the tyrant Antiochus Epiphanes, who was most famous for desecrating the temple and rededicating it to the Greek god, Zeus. Judah the Hammer, or Judas Maccabeus as we usually know him, fought Antiochus for three years and when he was finally victorious he marched into Jerusalem where he cleansed the temple and was proclaimed king. 1 Maccabees describes the celebration and procession of the people:

On the twenty-third day of the second month, in the one hundred and seventy-first year, the Jews entered it with praise and palm branches, and with harps and cymbals and stringed instruments, and with hymns and songs, because a great enemy had been crushed and removed from Israel. (1 Maccabees 13:51)

Even though Jesus was on a donkey, many of the people were thinking of Jesus as another Judas Maccabeus, this time come to defeat the pagan Romans and to free Israel. They sang words from Psalm 118 as they marched along with Jesus.

Save us, we pray, O LORD!

O LORD, we pray, give us success!

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!

We bless you from the house of the LORD.

The LORD is God, and he has made his light to shine upon us. (Psalm 118:25-27)

The Lord is God! The Lord has returned to Zion! Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Jesus is riding to his throne and everyone is celebrating, but still, they don't really understand. Right King; wrong kingdom. Jesus has done everything to point the people to the real nature of the kingdom. He's embraced sinners and outsiders and unclean people and the poor. He's rebuked the self-righteous. He's even told his disciples about his coming rejection and death. Now he rides in as king, but deliberately acts out Zechariah's prophecy and rides in not in a borrowed chariot, but on a borrowed donkey. He does the opposite of what Judas the Hammer had done. He even sets up a deliberate contrast with the military procession of Pontius Pilate, the governor, with his imperial eagles going before him. But that's all the people can see: another king David, another Judas

Maccabeus, another warrior. And that's all they can see, because they still haven't clued in that the enemy isn't the Romans; the true enemies of humanity are sin and death. And Jesus can only conquer them and take his throne by suffering the penalty of the sins of humanity and to die for the sake of his people.

The Pharisees see Jesus too as another revolutionary. Luke writes:

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out." (Luke 19:39-40)

The Pharisees didn't want Jesus stirring up this kind of trouble. It would bring the Romans down on them like a ton of bricks: "Stop it Jesus! Tell them to be quiet or we'll all be in for it!"

And yet even though the people still don't truly understand all that's about to happen over the next week, they're right to be praising Jesus. The King really is coming to take his throne; the Lord is truly returning to Zion; Jesus is about to lead humanity in a new Exodus from sin and death—the true Exodus of which the old one from Egypt was just a shadow. Back in Chapter 3, John the Baptist had warned the people to repent. The kingdom was coming and it wasn't enough to simply claim that Abraham was their father. The kingdom required more than that; it required faith and faith produces fruit. And John warned that if the biological sons of Abraham refused to repent, the Lord was perfectly capable of raising up new children for Abraham from the stones. Jesus brings the Pharisees back to that rebuke. If they won't praise the coming king, the Lord will cause the stones themselves to cry out in praise. Again, the King has come and he will have his kingdom whether Israel chooses to repent and be part of it or not.

Brothers and sisters, in us, the Lord has raised up children of Abraham from the stones. We aren't the biological sons and daughters of Abraham, but by faith in Jesus we have been grafted into his family—into the new Israel. As I've said before, we have the law and the prophets, just as the Jews did, but we have an advantage. They couldn't grasp what Jesus was about. They couldn't wrap their heads around the idea of the Messiah as both king *and* suffering servant. But we can. We have the gospels and the apostles too. And yet as much as we understand the suffering of Jesus and as much as we understand the cross, how often are we like the Jews? As they waved palm branches and praised Jesus on the road to Jerusalem, we gather in the church and sing praises to him too. But the Jews that day—many of them, at least—were imposing their own ideas on Jesus. They were happy and excited because they thought Jesus had come to fulfil their agendas. Had they known what Jesus was actually going to do, had they known that he was going to Jerusalem to suffer and die, most of them wouldn't have been in that Palm Sunday procession. The people turned on him as he stood before Pilate. Pilate offered to release the beaten and bloody King, but they shouted out to have him crucified. Why? Because they couldn't accept him as Messiah unless he was fulfilling their agenda.

Friends, we need to ask too if we're following Jesus to fulfil his agenda or if we're following him in the hopes that he will fulfil ours. Too many people come to Jesus for the wrong reasons: for personal fulfilment, for happiness, for health and prosperity. Brothers and sisters, none of that is the agenda of the Jesus who calls his disciples to follow him by daily taking up our crosses. Some of us are like the people there that first Palm Sunday, thinking that Jesus came like another Judas Maccabeus, to defeat

our enemies with the sword. We might not put it quite that way, but that's what we're saying whenever we confuse Jesus and his kingdom with political power and government coercion. Friends, the kingdom of God doesn't come by force with swords or guns and the hearts of men and women are not moved to repentance by legislating faith. Only the Holy Spirit can do that and he does it as the people of Jesus proclaim the Word of God and proclaim the Good News that Jesus is Lord. And we proclaim that message in part as we follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Dietrich Bonhoeffer is famous for penning the words, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."¹ That's what it means to take up our crosses. It means giving up our agenda, our rights, everything we hold dear that is not Jesus, even giving up our lives that the men and women of this world still lost in darkness might come to know the love and grace of Jesus, who became King only by giving everything for our sake.

Let us pray: King Jesus, we gather here this morning, much as the people gathered to praise you on the road to Jerusalem all those years ago. We give you thanks for having raised up children for Abraham from the stones and for making us a part of your family and your kingdom. But keep us always mindful of the nature of your kingdom. Keep us always mindful of your priorities. Put to death in us every selfish desire and give us the grace to live only for you and to make you known no matter the cost. Amen.

¹ *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM, 1948), 44.