

Palm Sunday B: Luke 19  
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### **A Funeral Parade**

In one of the earlier episodes of the TV series *M\*A\*S\*H*, the doctor known as “Trapper” gets diagnosed with a stomach ulcer. Although initially upset about having to deal with a hole in his gut, Trapper soon beams with joy when his bunkmate Hawkeye reminds him that, according to Army regulations, Trapper was going home! His ulcer was his ticket out of the misery of the Korean War. As the episode progresses, the other doctors in the unit arrange a farewell party for him. But minutes before Trapper shows up for his party, he is informed by the Company Clerk, Radar, that the Army had just changed its regulations and his ulcer would have to be treated right there in Korea. Trapper goes to the party anyway and allows the joviality, festivity, and joy of the evening to proceed for a good long while. When he’s asked to give a final speech, though, he tells everyone the truth: he’s not going anywhere after all.

Throughout the party, both Trapper and Radar have a look in their eyes that betray the truth, if only anyone had looked close enough to notice. Trapper smiles and even laughs during the party at times, but his laughter is muted and the sadness in his eyes tells the reason why: it’s a nice party but it’s not going to end the way he had hoped or the way all the other partygoers were anticipating.

I wonder, if someone had looked deep into Jesus’ eyes that day he processed into Jerusalem, if they might have seen something similar. All around him, his followers were celebrating, praising him as king, throwing their cloaks before him, and Jesus went along with it, with the fanfare. But had someone really looked, would they have seen a sadness in his eyes? Would the look on his face have given away the fact that he knew it wasn’t going to end the way his followers were anticipating?

Luke seems suggest this, the way he sets up the scene. For just before Jesus has his disciples find him a donkey, he tells his followers a story about a king, a story that ends with the king ordering the execution of his subjects who refuse to accept his rule. That’s rather dark! And then immediately after his procession, Luke has Jesus weeping for Jerusalem, for the disaster that will soon befall its inhabitants. So, Jesus doesn’t seem to be in a particularly ‘jubilant’ mood at this point.

Then you have how Luke describes the parade itself. Unlike the other Gospel writers, Luke makes no mention of great crowds singing ‘Hosannahs’ or palm branches being strewn on the road (so much for *Palm* Sunday), only cloaks. And although the disciples were indeed cheering and hailing Jesus as king, there is something almost a little desperate about it all. Riding a half-wild donkey across a hodge-podge of different colored coats made of burlap and whatnot doesn’t exactly scream ‘regal authority.’ They look a little like a bunch of kids playing dress-up, trying to convince themselves that little Billy from next door really is a “king” by wrapping him in his father’s bathrobe, laying down a faded red blanket and enthroning him in a lawn chair. And so, while those around Jesus are keen on putting on a show, parading him through the streets,

cheering him on, you have to wonder if, like Trapper Jesus isn't just playing along, waving and smiling at the "Blessed is the king" accolades, while inside he's heartbroken.

This is important for us in the church today to come to grips with. Too often, it seems we think of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem rather like the spectacle you see each year at the Academy Awards in Hollywood. You know how celebrities literally get what is known as "the red-carpet treatment" as yards and yards of gold-edged, deep-red carpeting covers the sidewalks and steps leading into the theater. The walkway is also lined with palm trees and throngs of cheering fans who wave and yell loudly.

That is the kind of VIP entrance we envision for Jesus. And envisioning it this way allows us to make Palm Sunday a kind of "bright spot" in the Lenten darkness, to help us through the "unpleasantness" of Holy Week to get to the Easter celebration. But if Luke's account is to be believed, we may be grossly misunderstanding the dynamics here. Instead of focusing on the fanfare, we should look deep into Jesus's eyes and see the sadness just behind the mirth, the deep pity that undergirds the larger celebration.

For, Jesus doesn't come to Jerusalem to be feasted and feted, to take his place as King of the Jews, no matter what his followers may be thinking. He comes to do his Father's will, and he knows that if he does his Father's will, it will lead not to a glorious throne, but to a shameful execution. As he said a few chapters before, "I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following: for it cannot be that a prophet would perish outside Jerusalem." And indeed, his triumphal entry ends with an ignominious exit, as he is abandoned by his friends, arrested, crucified and left for dead. We know that his death is not simply the inevitable result of confronting the powers-that-be, but rather the way he would triumph over them, by giving his life as a sacrifice for sin. But that in no way takes away from the reality of the passion, or his anguish in having to endure it.

This then makes it clear that, as right and natural as our celebration of Palm Sunday is, and as necessary as it may be—"if they were silent, the rocks themselves would cry out," as Jesus says—we misunderstand this story and misunderstand Jesus when we think that his entrance into Jerusalem is an occasion for unreserved revelry. For the more we turn Palm Sunday into some pre-Oscar red carpet celebrity gala, the more we forget that following Jesus is supposed to lead us *away* from the "red carpets" of this world to follow a man most don't want to follow, down a path most believe is a dead-end, going nowhere. Indeed, Luke's account seems keen on letting the air out of our balloons a bit, lest, like the crowds in this story, we get too carried away, lest in our excitement we expect and promote all the wrong things.

Jesus was throughout his ministry expressly concerned about that happening. And he refused any attempt to let his mission get captured by others' interests. He resisted making his message or ministry subservient to the culture, the government, or any other religious group. And as soon as this becomes clear, those who now hail him as king will desert him, act like they never knew him. This is because what they want is instant joy, immediate peace, and unqualified affirmation of their desires and prejudices, and they want it all without any effort, any sacrifice on their part. But Jesus just cannot give them that. That's not who he is, not the kind of "kingdom" he brings. And so while Jesus may be riding the wave of enthusiasm right now, he knows that that wave

will crash, as soon as it becomes clear that the road he is on is not leading to the royal palace but to the cross.

We may look down on these fair-weather fans, but to be honest, we're not too different from them. We too often think that being a Christian means God is supposed to grease our path, save us from suffering, and lead us straight into a good and pleasant land, and we assume something must be wrong, that God has lied to us, when that doesn't happen. CS Lewis shows the foolishness of this belief: "Christianity *is* a thing of unspeakable joy," he writes. "But it begins, not in joy, but in wretchedness. And it does no good to try to get to the joy by bypassing the wretchedness."

Christianity is indeed a thing of joy, but that joy is so exquisite, refined and thoughtful, because it has passed through suffering and death. The excitement of the parade, by contrast, is a rather shallow emotion, for being detached from Jesus' suffering that is to come. It is an ignorant exuberance, an enthusiasm unsobered by sorrow, wholly unlike the joy that emerges and endures through suffering. The excitement of the parade is then not a thing anyone should make much of, but instead something earnest believers should see through, as we look past the smiles and laughs and cheers to the sorrow in Jesus' eyes at his coming suffering.

To acknowledge this is not to lose heart or trust in God, but to acknowledge that not everything in life is goodness and light, even for Christians. And so to see the sadness of Jesus' eyes, it is to find another way in which we identify with our Lord—or perhaps better said, we find another way in which our Lord identifies with us. Because the eyes in which we see all that sadness are none other than Jesus' eyes, we know that Jesus understands what it's like to be in the midst of a joyful crowd but unable to join them in their mirth. He knows how lonely it can be when others are laughing and you feel left out. He knows how you can feel like you have to put on a smile when all you want to do is cry and how tough it is to go through a worship service with songs of praise on our lips but wrenching hurt in our hearts. Because the eyes in which we see all that sadness are none other than Jesus' own eyes, we know that when we feel that mixture of glory and pain, of joy and sorrow, we are known and seen by our Lord. More than that, we know that same Lord has promised us that the day is coming when that will be no more, when he will wipe every tear from every eye.

And this is possible because Jesus does not linger amongst the "triumphal" parade but proceeds onward to the cross and all that happened through that sacrifice. It is because he came to give his life for us, and not simply to claim an earthly throne, that his kingship has such power, setting him apart from all the other would-be messiahs and kings that came before and after him. And it is because we can see Jesus' parade for what is, a funeral procession, that it has meaning for us today, representing the first steps towards Golgotha, towards the death that brings life, towards the sacrifice that rights all that has ever been wrong with this world.

What this all means is we don't need to turn Palm Sunday into something it is not. We don't need to treat it as a pre-Easter celebration. We are right to celebrate Jesus as our King, but we are properly sobered by what it cost our Lord. His is a procession that goes not up to joy but first to suffer pain and death, not to enter into glory but first to accept the cross. *This* is his Triumphal Entry, the gateway to the Kingdom, the entrance to eternal life. Jesus must walk this road and we

are called to go with him. Following this way, the way of the cross, may we find it none other than the way of joy and peace and life. Amen.