

ROYAL APPROACH

Luke 19:28-42

Dr. Trevor Brown

A sermon preached for First Baptist Church of Amarillo, TX

March 28, 2021

THEATRE AT THE GATES

A little more than ten years ago, I and a few others made our way from Amritsar, India, to the India-Pakistan border, just a short trip away at the Wagah border crossing. It is there that every day, two hours before sunset, a one-of-a-kind ceremony happens. Each night the crowds begin to build as they prepare for the closing of the border ceremony.

It starts off feeling like a serious affair. There are several checkpoints to get there, a separate line for foreigners, and passports required. Then, suddenly, you find yourself in middle of an atmosphere like nothing else I've ever experienced. At the center of it all are two ornate, metal entry gates and corresponding flagpoles, but this is not just a flag ceremony. I would describe it as one part border battle, one part festival, one part soccer match, two parts dance off, and three parts high school pep rally.

Each country has clearly gathered the most impressive guards, measured primarily by their flexibility and marching prowess. The men seem to be exceptionally tall with impeccable facial hair. Each side wears dramatic fan-plumes on top of their helmets, only adding to the fact this looks like two rival birds, strutting peacocks performing a competing dance.

In case you think I'm being irreverent or belittling a fascinating cultural display, you should know that the people come in masses to watch the spectacle, too. Surrounding this, on both sides, are enormous grandstands. There are concessions: water, snacks, ice cream. There are yell leaders on microphones, flags waving, people chanting.

It's a 45-minute parade that manages to take turns being ferocious, ludicrous, and touching. They march with defiance in their complicated uniforms and shiny black boots, the soldiers from the two nations high-kicking towards each other. They snort. They stamp. They raise their fists. Their eyes are crazed right up to the moment when two of them quickly shake hands. But then they are off, marching again, slamming their heels to the ground with a crack that sounds like gunfire. The crowd loves it.

The entire display is meant to say there's peace here. The whole thing was more theatre than combat. It was as much for the crowd as it was for the closing.

Palm Sunday

Today's text is Luke's account of Jesus' own approach to the city gates. It's a procession recorded in every gospel account, as each of them – with their own emphases and different points of view – converge on this moment when Jesus sets his eyes on Jerusalem. For so many

around the world, it is the beginning of Holy Week. What begins on Palm Sunday will journey to the cross before celebrating the resurrection of our Lord.

We join Jesus in Luke 19 as he plans his own approach to the city gates. It's as much theatre as it is fulfillment of a prophecy five hundred years old. I want to draw your attention to more than one of Jerusalem's city gates. You are likely familiar with this Palm Sunday parade, but history tells us there were that there were two processions that entered Jerusalem on this spring day in the year 30 AD.ⁱ

They were not rival powers meeting at a border, but the procession we celebrate today presents us with a crossroads – an intersection - at which every person since has had to choose.

PILATE'S PARADE

Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, normally lived in Caesarea-by-the-Sea, about 60 miles to the west. They had their own temple there, built in worship of Emperor Augustus. As Roman authority over Judea (and several other surrounding states), Pilate was the monitor for the region.

For the great festivals and gatherings, like the enormous Passover crowd of this particular week, Pilate would come up to Jerusalem to prevent trouble. After all, the whole point of this Passover celebration was to commemorate and remember that time when God had liberated his people out from under Pharaoh's foot, bringing his people out of captivity. Rome would hardly want anyone getting any grand ideas about overthrowing empires.

Any number of groups would be intent on making sure Pilate, as a representative of Caesar, got the 'welcome' he 'deserved.' In the Jewish region of Judea, it's almost certain that people would've been mobilized from the top of society to the bottom to greet Pilate as he arrived.

The ruling high priest was chosen from among the Sadducees, appointed by the governor himself. They wouldn't want to miss this. The Pharisees, too, knew that what authority they observed was at the behest of Rome. The average citizens would've been encouraged by both of these groups and their own ambitions to follow suit, knowing that their Passover festival was only happening at the tolerant pleasure of Pilate. Everybody knows that for the right event a crowd can be arranged.ⁱⁱ (Kinman, 444)

Whether it was sincere or not, Pilate would've expected a splendid welcome, and he would've brought quite the display with him. His large entourage would've featured soldiers, infantry, and horsemen. It's hard to say how many, but with the size of the crowds filing in to Jerusalem for Passover and Rome's typical use of force to maintain order, we're talking about a number nearing one thousand troops at Pilate's side, each fitted with a large shield, breast-plate, headpiece, sword, spear, and two axe. You add to them the number of administrative personnel and other officials, and you can imagine the imprint they would make.

So, this imperial procession imposes itself on the city, arriving from the west upon a military war horse with an armed escort.

JESUS'S PLANNED PROCESSION

Meanwhile, on the other side of town, approaching from the east, Jesus is going up to Jerusalem. He has a procession of his own to orchestrate. So clear are the echoes of Old Testament prophecy that there's no doubt he knows what he's doing. Jesus is rehearsing before the first disciples and every disciple since that he is the true and rightful King of world and that what is taking place is the foretold plan of God.ⁱⁱⁱ

Luke 19:28 tells us that as Jesus approached the two small towns (Bethany and Bethpage), he picked two disciples and put them on donkey detail. I like to think it was the same two who had just asked to sit on his right and left in glory. They wanted a special role. "James, John, do you still want a special task?"

He sent two of the disciples,³⁰ saying, "Go into the village ahead of you; there, as you enter, you will find a colt tied on which no one yet has ever sat; untie it and bring it here. ³¹ If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' you shall say, 'The Lord has need of it.'"

All four gospels place a donkey at the center of the events. Nowhere in the gospels does it mention that Mary rode a donkey when she and Joseph made the trek to Bethlehem, yet all four gospels highlight the colt Jesus acquires for his approach to Jerusalem. For six verses, Luke offers unprecedented detail about the donkey.

First, Jesus says they'll find him tied up. When Jacob prophesied to his sons about the future of God's people in Genesis 49:11 he said the blessing of Judah: **"He will tether his donkey to a vine, his colt to the choicest branch."** (NIV)

Jesus tells them next what to say if anyone asks why they're untying the donkey: "The Lords needs it." You could even say literally, "*its* Lord needs it." They're making a theological claim even in collecting the ride. It's also the kind of claim a king can make to anything you own. Jesus is exercising a divine right to conscript animals from his subjects.

But, why a donkey at all? Jesus has walked the whole way up until now. His entire ministry has been on foot, never once seen riding. So we know this is a calculated event. One mile or so from where this whole thing is headed, he suddenly pauses for a ride. Jesus' Jewish followers would not have missed the symbolism. It comes straight from the Old Testament. This is a predicted day.

Zechariah 9:9

**Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious,
lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.**

In Luke, the reference is implied. In Matthew, the connection is explicit as he quotes the passage directly. Jesus has used words, but his actions now speak louder as his life confirms for their eyes what he has been telling them is true. It's an acted-out parable. Jesus' entry march is to be a royal procession! He will ride an animal never ridden before, because that's what royalty does.

Thoughtful Jews would have remembered that, many years before Solomon, another Son of David, rode a donkey into Jerusalem. Solomon means "King of Peace," even as David meant King of War. Jesus knew they could remember that, so he presents himself as King riding on a donkey.

³² So those who were sent went away and found it just as He had told them. ³³ As they were untying the colt, its ^[a]owners said to them, "Why are you untying the colt?" ³⁴ They said, "The Lord has need of it." ³⁵ They brought it to Jesus, and they threw their coats on the colt and put Jesus on it.

The text repeats itself to make sure we don't miss it: everything happens just as Jesus says. He is a man who knows where he has come from and knows to where he is headed. These events are happening in accordance with God's purposes to redeem the world, and so will what is to come next. They take their coats off and fashion a saddle for Jesus. Luke tells us they get the message because, before Jesus can mount it himself, they've *put him* on it. They can see it; he is the Messiah, the Davidic King!

³⁶ As He was going, they were spreading their coats on the road. ³⁷ As soon as He was approaching, near the descent of the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of the disciples began to praise God ^[a]joyfully with a loud voice for all the ^[a]miracles which they had seen, ³⁸ shouting:

**"Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord;
Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"**

They're shouting, maybe even singing, the words of Psalm 118, a hymn used in Israel's history for a royal entry and for celebrations of enthronement. **"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."** Psalm 118:26

Luke 19:27 says they've seen the miracles Jesus has done, and they have realized that truly God is at work. He is the King, and he is the one who will save us! And not only that, Luke wants us to see what kind of king Jesus will be. The crowd is reported as echoing the words that Luke places in the mouth of angels at Jesus' birth. **"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." Luke 2:14**

He is the lowly, humble King of whom Zechariah spoke.

**See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious,
lowly and riding on a donkey on a colt, the foal of a donkey.**

¹⁰ I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the warhorses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken, He will proclaim peace to the nations.”

He will be a King of peace. The contrast couldn't be more clear.

Pilate mounted a war horse and came galloping through the largest gate in the city.

Jesus is riding on a donkey colt, nearing the small Eastern gate.

Pilate is decked out in armor, with banners waving and an entourage of elites.

Jesus has no armor, and his procession is a rag-tag crowd of followers he'd gained from Galilee.

Pilate comes flaunting his power, glory, and the force of an empire that ruled the world.

Jesus' procession comes revealing the kingdom of God, commanding peace to the nations, the end of chariots and warhorses and bows.

Pilate comes with a military display of imperial might.

Jesus comes with coats on the ground and children waving branches.

I wonder today, which gate do you think felt more power pass through?

The only robes for this royal come torn from former lepers or smelling like fishermen. There is no scepter, only palm branches. There are no magistrates or princes, only tax collectors and the once demon-possessed. What a strange crowd!^{iv}

If you were in town looking for a king, which parade would you join?

I'm here to tell you today that after every triumph, success, or policy of every Caesar is long forgotten, Christians around the world will remember for all of time the day that King Jesus came to Jerusalem and presented himself as King.

Luke doesn't mention it, but the other gospel writers present the crowd shouting "Hosanna," a word of praise that means "save us now."

³⁹ Some of the Pharisees [] in the crowd said to Him, "Teacher, rebuke Your disciples." ⁴⁰ But Jesus answered, "I tell you, if these become silent, the stones will cry out!" ⁴¹ When He approached *Jerusalem*, He saw the city and wept over it, ⁴² saying, "If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes."

The whole thing is too much for the pharisees, and they want Jesus to rebuke them, but Jesus knows that God can raise up children from the stones if he wants. The commotion they're causing is hardly the biggest problem.

A ROYAL APPROACH

All of this happens as Jesus approaches Jerusalem. In that moment, it feels like everything is happening just right: all of this struggle in the gospels to reveal who he is or *wait* to reveal who he is. "Keep quiet... tell no one... the time is near..." Finally, the parade we wanted!

We have called this procession a “triumphant entry.” Sometimes I think we give the impression that the whole city worships and adores Jesus on this Sunday before Good Friday, but the gospel writers make it clear that the “Hosannas” don’t come in the city streets. They come from that group who comes with him. In Matthew, the city stirs and asks who it is, but they don’t take off their coats for it. No, Matthew and Mark tell us that Jesus comes into the city and takes immediate aim to cleanse the temple.

Make no mistake, Jesus will have his triumph, but this is really more of a royal approach than a triumphant entry. Jesus is performing for them the reality of his kingship, but he’s not the king the masses want. In no moment is this more clear than the next verse as he praises quiet down. Jesus looks up to see Jerusalem and he *weeps* over it, saying, **“If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace!”**

JESUS WEEPS

He weeps because he can see the disaster coming. They cannot see that their salvation, their redemption, their life, will not come from the ways of this world. The city whose name literally contains the word meaning “peace,” doesn’t know anything about it. So, Jesus weeps.

Somehow Jesus’ weeping over Lazarus is more famous, but these are the tears that should grab us. Before we dare wave a palm or throw down our coats today, watch as the world’s King, when his eyes glimpse the city, stops to weep. They didn’t want King Jesus after all, and his kingdom was considered a joke.

Two processions made their way into Jerusalem that day. And, as those who seek to be faithful to Jesus today, we’re forced to ask ourselves: which parade are we a part of?

Jesus approaches Jerusalem and presents us with a crossroads. It’s a moment of confrontation between two kingdoms. We will follow it all the way through the last week of Jesus’ life, but it is also a moment of reckoning for us.

Jesus’ closest followers will shout, “He’s the King” today, but what they really mean is “He might be the king I want.” By the end of the week, they’ll abandon him because they’re blinded by the way the world normally works. He owns the cattle on a thousand hills and formed the rocks with his right hand, but when his kingdom no longer fits, they throw him off his “borrowed” colt put him in a “borrowed” tomb.

So do we. We do it every time we praise his royal approach but deny him entry to the throne.

It might be easier if, today, we stood with only two processions to choose from. At least then we might stand a chance, but the reality is that there are more like ten or twenty or two thousand different processions all trying to lay claim on our lives. Each one offers a different distraction, a different reason why the way of Jesus can wait until later. Other parades suggest

it just won't work or needs some of the world's logic added to it. So, we shout "save us now," and when we don't get the results we want, we run back to the kings of this world.

Jesus comes on this Palm Sunday and presents himself as King in every city and to every heart that he might be welcomed as King, and he weeps.

He weeps for every one of us who will walk away from our Hosannas when he isn't the king we want. He weeps because when it clashes with our policies and projects, our dollars and decisions, our loves and losses, we will walk away from the kingdom of God. He weeps because he knows that many who shout praises today are unwilling to deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow him. He weeps because he knows that the lure of our own economy, ingenuity, and sin so easily entangles. He weeps because he knows how many will fall for Caesar's charade, that broad is Pilate's gate that leads to destruction, and many will find it.

If only you had known the things which make for peace. They don't see it, so he cries as if to say, "I will have to go and show them." My throne will be a cross. My only crown will be of thorns.

You can join Jerusalem in rejecting him as King. You can join the masses who missed it altogether, or you can open the gate and welcome in him as Lord, letting all things be subject to him.

Blessed is the King who comes in the name of Lord!

ⁱ Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Final Days* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2006). 2-30.

ⁱⁱ Brent Kinnman, "Jesus' 'Triumphal Entry' in the Light of Pilates," *New Testament Studies* (vol. 40, 1994) 442-448.

ⁱⁱⁱ For similar commentary's on the text see: David Garland, *Luke: Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Zondervan, 2011), 765-777; Fred Craddock, *Luke* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 225-229; Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke (The International Commentary on the New Testament)* (Eerdmans, 1997), 680ff; R. Alan Culpepper, *Luke-John (New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Vol VIII)*, 307-311.

^{iv} R. Alan Culpepper, *Luke-John (New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Vol VIII)*, 310-311.