

King of Scum

Luke 19:29-40 ²⁹ As Jesus came to Bethphage and Bethany on the Mount of Olives, he gave two disciples a task. ³⁰ He said, "Go into the village over there. When you enter it, you will find tied up there a colt that no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹ If someone asks, 'Why are you untying it?' just say, 'Its master needs it.'" ³² Those who had been sent found it exactly as he had said. ³³ As they were untying the colt, its owners said to them, "Why are you untying the colt?" ³⁴ They replied, "Its master needs it." ³⁵ They brought it to Jesus, threw their clothes on the colt, and lifted Jesus onto it. ³⁶ As Jesus rode along, they spread their clothes on the road. ³⁷ As Jesus approached the road leading down from the Mount of Olives, the whole throng of his disciples began rejoicing. They praised God with a loud voice because of all the mighty things they had seen. ³⁸ They said, "Blessings on the king who comes in the name of the Lord. Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heavens." ³⁹ Some of the Pharisees from the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, scold your disciples! Tell them to stop!" ⁴⁰ He answered, "I tell you, if they were silent, the stones would shout."

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Passover was coming. The occupation forces of Rome knew enough Jewish history to know that this was the most dangerous and volatile time of the year. Passover was a holiday that was centuries old, but its meaning hadn't been diminished or corrupted by time. That's hard for us to imagine. We've taken a day that was designated to remember Christians who set notably good examples in the lives they led - and we've turned it into a "gi-normous" holiday of dressing in costumes, sending children out to collect candy from neighbors, and horror movies about satanic incarnations wrecking violent terror on innocent people, many of whom happen to be attractive young females. We celebrate the birth of Emmanuel with lavish spending on travel and gifts, lavish feasting, and lavish credit card bills. And the resurrection of that same Emmanuel has become a time for new clothes, chocolate bunnies, and children running around searching for colored eggs left by a rabbit instead of a chicken. That's a bit misleading, biologically.

But the stiff-necked Jews hadn't bent Passover into a holiday that was focused on shopping or partying or Kodak moments with adorable children. Even after thirteen centuries, Passover was still 100% about remembering that they had been slaves in Egypt, and that God had sent Moses to lead them to freedom. And so, Passover was always a tense time for the Roman occupation forces, a time when Jews might get the wild idea that it was time again for them to be free.

Now, the Roman governors of Judea lived in the beautiful port city of Caesarea on the Mediterranean Sea. But during major Jewish festivals, it was standard practice for the Roman governor to take troops to Jerusalem to reinforce the garrison that was permanently stationed there. Entering through a western gate in the city walls, Pilate led an imperial procession into Jerusalem. The arrival was designed to impress and awe the people of the city. Pilate rode a huge war horse. There was mounted cavalry. There were foot soldiers marching in step to beating drums. There's something about the continual steady beat of marching feet that conveys a sense of power – unshakeable strength – inevitable domination. Thump, thump, thump, thump. On and on it went, over and over, like it'd never end. The sun reflected off of swords and helmets. Leather armor creaked and banners waved in the breeze. It was a parade of power and might that was meant to overwhelm any itch to resist Rome.

Across town, a ragtag group was coming down the path from the Mount of Olives and headed toward an eastern gate into the city. There were no uniforms, no drums, no helmets gleaming in the sun. It was a motley bunch. There was a poor beggar named Bartimaeus in a worn out robe with a silly grin plastered on his face. He looked intently around at everybody and everything like someone who was seeing the world for the first time. There were some simple fishermen from the boondocks of Galilee. There was a tax collector, one of those greedy turncoats who bled his fellow Jews to support the

occupying army – and filled his own pockets. There were twelve men who had been following a country rabbi for a while. Two of them, a couple of brothers, had just recently tried to talk the rabbi into putting them in charge of the other ten. That really hurt morale and got everyone upset. There were some women who had been part of the group for some time, and they were the ones who had been paying the bills. It was a haphazard collection of people, folks from the dregs of society.

In the center of this little crowd was that wandering back country rabbi. He wore a plain peasant robe and he was riding a donkey, a borrowed donkey. Oddly enough, though, the crowd swelled in size. More misfits gathered around. There were Samaritans, blind men and fallen women, and people who were so crazy that they seemed to have demons inhabiting their bodies. Many had heard Jesus teach - and his compassion and acceptance drew them like a magnet. Others had heard of him, and their curiosity pulled them into the crowd. In the Gospel stories something is often out of kilter. The rich fool dies, the publican goes down to the temple justified, the poor widow who puts only two cents in the offering plate is praised above those who give large amounts, now the person who said these surprising things entered Jerusalem riding on a borrowed donkey.

Someone, struck by the sight of this peasant teacher riding a borrowed donkey, recalled that the prophet Zechariah had written. "Sing aloud, Daughter Jerusalem. Look, your king will come to you. . . . He is humble and riding on an ass, on a colt, the offspring of a donkey." (Zechariah 9:9) Could this humble country rabbi become the king of Judea? And someone else replied, "Just maybe! I remember the story of how King David sent his own mule with Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet to go find his son Solomon. And they found Solomon and anointed him and put him on his father's mule. And all the people said, 'Long live King Solomon!'" (1 Kings 1:38-39) Solomon rode a mule and the prophet Zechariah wrote about a king coming on a donkey. Maybe this Jesus is coming to Jerusalem to become our king.

Someone else remembered that when Jehu became king people threw their cloaks beneath his feet. (2 Kings 9:12-13) So the crowd around Jesus began to take their cloaks and throw them on the ground as the donkey came near. The cloaks were dirty and threadbare, torn and ragged, for these were poor and downtrodden people. Someone began to sing one of the songs of pilgrims as they would climb the mountain toward the temple. We know it as Psalm 118 and the words say "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord," (Psalm 118:26) But the crowd on the hillside of Mount Olive, filled with desperate hope, began to sing, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord."

Among those who knew Jesus best were a few who knew his mother, Mary. They had heard the story of how she had sung a song of hope when she was pregnant with Jesus years ago. She had sung, "He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty-handed." (Luke 1:52-53 CEB) That reminded them of things they had seen Jesus do. And everyone sang even louder, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord."

All of this commotion and boisterous singing about a king attracted the attention of some Pharisees - and it made them very nervous. Talk like *this* might catch the attention of the Roman soldiers - and it would surely be seen as treasonous. "Shhhh! Keep quiet! That's dangerous talk!" And for the first time since he mounted the donkey, we hear Jesus speak. He said, "If they were silent, the stones would shout!" The stones would shout? What an odd expression! And perhaps these Pharisees remembered how a few years earlier John the Baptist had told them that they shouldn't feel complacent just because they descended from Abraham. He had declared, "God is able to raise up Abraham's children from these stones."

When we step back from this parade that is headed toward a gate in Jerusalem's east wall, we see a peasant rabbi, riding on a humble donkey, being hailed as a king. If that's the case, it appears that he's king of fishermen, tax collectors, Samaritans, crazy people, lepers and cripples, blind men and loose women - king of the oppressed, destitute, and suffering – king of the scum among a conquered nation.

That isn't what we want to see. So, when we paint this scene in children's Bible story books or paint it in our own minds, we make Jesus the king of a better class of people. The crowd is huge, probably much bigger than it really was. The people are clean. The cloaks are brightly colored and look new. The expressions on the faces show more jubilant joy than desperate hope. We hear triumphal music of full orchestra, giant pipe organ, and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir singing, "King of kings and Lord of lords!" But that day, it was a crowd of untrained voices, singing with desperate hope for a leader that would rescue them from both the Romans and from their miserable life at the bottom of the social heap. Yes, we really want to make Jesus king of a better grade of people.

The people that day had a choice that was illustrated in high relief by these two parades. Caesar's kingdom was built on domination and ruthless power. The kingdom of God, as preached and practiced by Jesus, was founded on justice, mercy, and love of God. But that same choice is before each of us this Palm Sunday. In fact, we face this choice every day. Where will we put our trust? How will we live? Do we trust the power of position and money – or do we put our trust in love and compassion? Do we trust the power of forgiveness – or do we see strength in vengeance? Do we immediately see the worth of those who live well – but are blind to the worth of those who struggle to survive? Which parade do you watch? Which parade do you want to be in? Over and over, every day, we participate in one parade or the other. Amen.