

A Borrowed Donkey

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Luke 19:28-40

28 After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. 29 When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, 30 saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. 31 If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" 32 So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. 33 As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" 34 They said, "The Lord needs it." 35 Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. 36 As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. 37 As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, 38 saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" 39 Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." 40 He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

Many of the people of Jesus' day expected the Messiah to be a take-charge kind of Savior. He was to come in power and physical might, as the one who would overthrow the Roman occupiers, once and for all. When Jesus came into Jerusalem on the day we now refer to as Palm Sunday, this is what was on the minds of many of the people. Author Brian McLaren retold the Palm Sunday story from that perspective. In his retelling, "Operation Sacred Vengeance" is the name of the rebel campaign. Jesus and his disciples have met secretly for days outside of Jerusalem, arranging where the horses and weapons will be stored, and planning for the crowds to create chaos in the streets, with the militia's strike soon to follow.

I'll pick up McLaren's retelling from there:

Jesus mounts a white horse. He is carrying a huge sword, but has it hidden in a palm branch. His disciples are similarly well-armed with swords, daggers, and shields, all camouflaged behind palm branches. They are mounted on warhorses, prepared for battle. The word goes out and the crowds assemble. In each man's right hand is a sword or dagger raised to the sky, concealed beneath in a palm frond or coat. Each left hand is raised in a fist. Younger men and boys carry concealed torches, ready to light them, march on the city, and create mayhem when the battle begins...

As they cross the brow of the hill near Bethany and the city comes into view, Jesus gives a rousing speech. "It is wrong for the heathen idolaters to have power over the faithful people of God!" he shouts. "That wrong must end today! We have suffered enough. Now we will make our persecutors suffer!" The people cheer and chant, "Victory! Victory! Crush the Romans! Kill the collaborators!"

"Who is with me in our holy cause?" Jesus asks. The crowds shout, "We are!" in a roar that echoes across the valley into the streets of Jerusalem. "Who is willing to fight to the death and avenge the blood of our ancestors?" Again the crowds shout, "We are!" ... Then the branches and coats are thrown to the ground and blades glisten in the sun. (<http://brianmclaren.net/archives/blog/palm-sunday-2011-end-of-violence.html>)

No, this is not the way that it went, though there was likely a similar parade going on that day. Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan assert that while Jesus was making his way into the city from the east, Pontius Pilate would have been entering the city from the west, at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. He came to Jerusalem at the time of the Jewish Passover observance when the city of around forty thousand people became a city of around two hundred thousand. With the Passover recollecting God's deliverance of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt, Pilate brought Roman troops to ensure that the situation did not get out of hand, and to remind the pilgrims of the might of the Roman military just in case they got any ideas.

Borg and Crossan describe the imperial procession this way: "A visual panoply of imperial power: cavalry on horses, foot soldiers, leather armour, helmets, weapons, banners, golden eagles mounted on poles, sun glinting on metal and gold. Sounds: the marching of feet, the creaking of leather, the clinking of bridles, the beating of drums. The swirling of dust." (*The Last Week*, p. 3)

In contrast, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is on the back of a young donkey, borrowed from someone in the next village. This processional is included in all four gospels, in slightly different accounts. Today, we read from Luke, who doesn't explicitly mention that it is a donkey on which Jesus is riding, calling it only a "colt." However, the event is clearly a fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9, which reads "Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." Luke also doesn't mention the palm branches; those are included only in John's account. The donkey (or colt), however, is included in all four accounts. This is not a minor detail. This is a tremendous contrast to the Roman imperial parade. Jesus did not ride into town on a mighty stallion, but on a young donkey. He did not come in a display of military strength, but in humility. He did not wear royal robes, but the clothes of the poor. He did not come as one who would conquer the Roman powers, but as one who would conquer our hearts. He did not come to

reign just over Jerusalem, but over the whole world. He did not come to kill, but to be a sacrifice for us all. His weapons are not instruments of destruction, but instruments of peace. He came not to bring the Roman kind of “peace” – the *Pax Romana*, but the everlasting peace of God.

This parade of Jesus highlights for us the kind of king which Jesus came to be, the kind of king who upsets the status quo; the kind of king who the powers of the present age cannot abide. For his processional entering into Jerusalem was opposing Pilate’s processional. He would shortly afterward tell Pilate that his kingdom is not of this world. It is a kingdom which we often oppose with our lives, while shouting praise with our lips. We say we want to be on the side of Jesus, but we often align ourselves with the powerful. We say we want the peace that Jesus came to bring, but we often cheer politicians and others who call for war. We say that we are on the side of Jesus with the weak and the marginalized, but we often shun those who are different. The people of Jesus’ day were no different. The path that Jesus took was one that would unquestionably end in his death.

And so he rode on a *borrowed* donkey, for he would soon have no need of it.