

Sermon Palm Sunday

Luke 19:28-40

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Holy week has now officially begun – today we remember that Jesus entered into Jerusalem for the last events in his life. In a few days time he would be killed and buried, during the most festive season of the Jews.

But today, together with thousands of people, Jesus moved along the road from Jericho, via Bethany, into the city of Jerusalem, and it seemed a happy occasion!

The Gospel writers, Luke included, had a theological framework for why and how they wrote about this last week in the life of our Lord.

The manner in which St Luke describes the event teaches us something about who Jesus is; Luke also teaches us the meaning of holy week; and he teaches us something about our worship.

First, who is this Jesus

The description of the moment when Jesus entered Jerusalem on his donkey is dense with meaning. The event made clear: Jesus is not a normal human being, yes, not even just a prophet.

His name was a normal one, Jesus. Many Jewish boys had this name. But an angel gave the name Jesus to the child, so there was something special about it in this case.

The name means JHWH saves. God saves. And when the angel gave that name to Mary, he also explained why:

He will be great and he will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end. (Luke 1:32-33)

This is how Luke began the description of who Jesus is, at the time of his birth, and now, when Jesus is about to die, Luke comes back to this matter. The life, the works and the words of Jesus have shown that the angel was right.

Here is the Son of God. Jesus is almighty: He had in the past days raised Lazarus from the dead, and he had given the blind Bartimaeus the light in his eyes again. No wonder the people were incredibly excited when Jesus was about to enter into Jerusalem.

Jesus asked for a donkey – and in truly royal manner, he demanded that it should be one that had never been used. This was the prerogative of

kings in those days! Jesus sent his followers to a village with the command: 'The Lord needs it.' That was enough. His will was done.

Was it possible that this Jesus, with whom the people were walking and talking, might actually be the great king, the son of king David for whom they had been waiting for centuries? Would Israel have a King again, just as the angel had announced to Jesus' mother, Mary?

It was impossible for the Jews in those days not to understand the claims of Jesus. He rode on a new donkey into Jerusalem! He declared that he was the Messiah, the anointed one of God.

In the times of Jesus, the words from the prophet Zechariah were seen as a prediction of the coming of the Messiah. Zechariah wrote hundreds of years before Jesus was born:

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. (Zech 9:9)

Here he is! The Son of God, God himself, coming to his city. And he was coming with salvation!

Most Jews thought that salvation meant that Jesus would give the Romans such an amazing beating that Israel would free from occupation again. Away with evil rulers! That is what we need! Away with those bloodsuckers in the palace who make our lives awful! Freedom we need! Freedom we want!

But the people forgot that Zechariah says about this same Messiah in the following verse:

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. (Zech 9:10)

This Messiah is a King who destroys weapons and who creates peace. Weapons are not his way to save his people. And this is what Holy Week is about.

So... What is Holy Week

The joy over Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem was great but Jerusalem itself did not celebrate his coming. The travellers, the disciples of Jesus, they celebrated, but the city of Jerusalem was more reserved to Jesus, if not outright hostile.

They were afraid, I guess, that an uproar about Jesus could create instability. That the Romans would see his coming to the city as a reason for oppressing the city even harder. 'We need stability, we need rest, our economy goes down the drain, we do not need another incident. If only we can just have our jobs, our income.'

The crowds traveling to Jerusalem were celebrating, while the city of Jerusalem was shaken, worried, upset and scared.

This negative attitude of Jerusalem reminds us of the birth story of Jesus, when people from abroad, wise men from the East, came to Jerusalem to inquire about the newly born King.

The outsiders wanted to worship Jesus; but Jerusalem was worried, and the ruler over Jerusalem, king Herod, had many baby boys killed, hoping that thereby he would finish this whole story of an alternative King for Israel.

Such murder would again take place a few days after Jesus entered into Jerusalem. Now Jesus himself would die, because the city of God, the heart of Jewish religion with the temple and with the theological training institutes, was against Jesus.

Luke describes how some religious leaders, the Pharisees, told Jesus off. 'How can you allow your followers to praise you so abundantly! Teacher, rebuke your disciples! What they say is blasphemy!'

The whole scene for the bloody murder of Jesus on the cross is now set. The city holds its breath; it does not want to create troubles with the Romans. Better that one man dies than that all the people will be punished by the Romans. Jerusalem was not open to the idea that God has indeed sent his Son.

What Luke knew and what we know, but what most Jews could not perceive at that point, was that the Son of God, who became a human being to be the Messiah, the King of David, had to suffer and die for the salvation of the people.

As is written in the prophet Isaiah 53:3

He was despised and rejected by men;
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

This was what was to happen to the Messiah. This was the fate of the King of Israel.

Why? Read what Isaiah said further in Isaiah 53:4-6:

Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us
peace, and with his wounds we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

Salvation means the complete renovation of our whole world; the *heart* of salvation is that God and man are reconciled. This has been made possible because Jesus was punished for our transgressions and because his goodness was counted by God as our benefit.

We are spiritually bankrupt; we are never good enough for relating to the great and perfect God. But Jesus made up the deficit. He paid for our debt to God and he has put his spiritual perfection in our heavenly bank account so that we are fully acceptable for God.

Upon him, upon Jesus, was the punishment that brought us peace!

The people in Jerusalem wanted peace and hoped that Jesus would keep quiet in order to not upset the social order with the Roman occupiers.

The masses wanted peace and hoped Jesus would kick the Romans out. They may not have understood much of the implications of the words they chanted, but we do. Luke 19:37-38:

As Jesus was drawing near [to Jerusalem] 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!"

Here the followers of Jesus burst out in worship. This is our proper response to the goodness of God! What do we learn from this event about worship?

What is worship?

It is honoring Jesus for who he is and for what he did for us.

'Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord.'

The crowds around Jesus knew these lines so well from Psalm 118. These words were used in the liturgy of Israel during many of the feasts, and also now at the season of Easter. The people spontaneously praised God, but they did so in

words that had been hammered into them in the liturgy of Israel.

The followers of Jesus repeated these lines from the temple liturgy – and from the book of Psalms, the liturgical handbook of Israel. And we, together with the church throughout the centuries, use the same words again in our communion liturgy.

‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord’, those words entered into the liturgy of the church at a very early stage, and interestingly, it related the words to Holy Communion.

The earliest description of the liturgy of the church, written about 30 years after the New Testament, is called the Teaching of the Apostles – a beautiful small book. It describes that before wine and bread are given to the people, the priest must say:

May grace come, and may this world pass away.
Hosanna to the God of David. Whoever is holy, let him approach; whoever is not, let him repent.

Just as the Lord entered the holy city on a donkey, so too the church sees him coming again and again in the humble form of bread and wine.

The church greets the Lord in the Holy Eucharist as the one who is coming now, the one who has entered into our midst!

Also very interesting, Luke quotes the multitude of disciples as shouting ‘Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!’ Do you recall those words? Luke opens his Gospel with the song of the angels.

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” (Luke 2:13-14)

At the birth Jesus there is a multitude of angels, giving glory to God and announcing peace and glory.

At the end of his life, there is a multitude again, now of believers in Jesus, repeating those same words with the angels. And this is, I believe, the heart of our liturgy; the heart of our worship.

Together with the angels in heaven, who worship God in his heavenly temple, we worship God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

This, Luke says, how it should be. Christian worship of God is us joining the heavenly choir. We praise God for the birth of Jesus, we praise God for his death and resurrection, and for everything in between. We and the angels. A worship team.

The angels sing of peace on earth; the disciples sing of peace in heaven. This is no contradiction but Gospel truth: we sing the one song of peace in heaven and on earth.

Because Jesus came to save humankind, heaven and earth are no longer a contradiction. They are united in peace. Jesus had brought God and us together.

And that is why, when we celebrate our worship here, we participate in worship with the angels before the throne of God. And the angels participate with us!

Our church is filled with the heavenly angels, and with all who abide with God in heaven, even the Christians who have passed away. All are present here and now as together we glorify God before his throne for the peace He has generously donated to us.

Conclusion

Holy Week has begun. The Son of God came down from heaven for this very moment. He came to live for the glory of God as the King and Messiah of Israel; He died because we, earthlings, had no interest in so much goodness in our midst.

He went on a donkey into Jerusalem to face death for our sake. He adopted the cross of this Holy Week to liberate us from our sins and to reconcile us with God.

So that we could be reunited with God – and praise Him with words and with our lives. So that we join in the eternal and holy choir of angels, to live with God and to live for God.

Amen