

When I recall hearing the Palm Sunday story as a kid, I always wondered how Jesus knew exactly where there would be a colt tied up in the village ahead of them. I wondered, how did he know that the owners would be just fine if some strangers came up to the colt, untied it, and said, “The Lord needs it.” And they’re like, “go ahead, that’s fine.” Don’t you find that rather odd?

It would be like if Jesus was on his way to Saskatoon and just as he was nearing Osler and Warman, he said to two of his disciples; “Go up a head into Osler, turn in at the Esso, go two blocks, take a left and there will be a brand new Honda Accord in the driveway with the keys in the ignition. Get in the car. And if the owners see you getting in and starting the car, just roll down the windows and say, “Jesus needs it,” and they’ll be like, “yup, cool, don’t even fill it up when you return it. Go in one Accord”

Sounds a little whacky, doesn’t it? And while a childlike reading of the text might come off as somewhat random, or even “magical”, let’s be clear, there is nothing random about this encounter and the events that follow.

As Jesus prepares to enter Jerusalem, the Holy City of the Jewish people and the location of the restored Temple, nothing Jesus does is random or without intent and purpose. From the colt and the cloaks on the road to the parade and shouts of adoration, Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem is a message in and of itself.

By choosing to ride a colt, Jesus is invoking images from Zechariah 9:9, where it is written; "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."

The cloaks on the road invoke 2 Kings 9:13, where after Jehu announces to the crowd that the prophet Elisha has just anointed him to be King of Israel, the people remove their cloaks, create something like a "red" carpet and as Jehu passes by, shout and proclaim, "Jehu is king!"

Similarly, after Jesus sits on the colt – the crowd starts singing from Psalm 118, "Blessed is the One who comes in the name of Lord," clearly implying that Jesus is the long awaited Messiah, the Son of David, in whom the people of Israel have long been waiting for. In fact, if we put this story in context, just prior to the triumphal entry, we can see this theme building up as Jesus is referred to as the "Son of David"

by a poor blind man near Jericho and immediately after that, Jesus tells a parable about a king.

And lastly, all of this was done in the context of a parade, which is nothing less than a royal procession.

Throughout the First Century, Jerusalem was accustomed to these kinds of processions. Military parades were used to highlight the victories of war, the generals and leaders who won those wars, and often the bounty and losers who were humiliated and humbled by those wars. These ritualistic affairs included four distinct elements; First, the conqueror or ruler was escorted by the citizenry into the city; secondly, there was singing of hymns of praise for the victor; thirdly, there were symbols of victory and power, like the bounty or the victims, and fourthly, there was often some sort of sacrifice given at the city's main temple.

Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, describes Alexander the Great's entry into Jerusalem this way;

“Then all the Jews, together greeted Alexander with one voice and surrounded him...He gave his hand to the high priest and, with the Jews running beside him, entered the city. Then he went up to the

temple where he sacrificed to God under the direction of the high priest.”

I trust you can see the parallels.

Jesus is surrounded by his disciples, and clearly some Pharisees and others; he enters the city to praises of thanksgiving and glory; and he goes into the temple to protest the sacrificial system where 5 days later, becomes the sacrifice.

Thus, the royal implications of the entry into Jerusalem are clear. Without saying a word, Jesus sparks the imaginations of his disciples and those around him, and you can feel the joy, anticipation and tension. The moment has finally arrived! The heir of David has returned! The long-awaited Messiah has come! And the day of liberation, or wrath, depending on your perspective, is here. The reign of the Roman occupiers and their puppet government is over. The new age of God's kingdom is about to appear.

For Lord of the Rings fans, I liken this moment to when Aragorn accepts who he is as the King of Gondor. Excitement builds up. Gondor can be saved. And Sauron, and all his puppets and minions, can finally be defeated. And of course poor Denethor II, the Steward of Gondor, the

one who maintains the throne while the king is away, must now return it to the one whom it belongs...which of course he can't.

The political significance of this event cannot be lost on us. Even some of the Pharisees get it and understand what is taking place, and this leaves them nervous. They understand that there is no room on the throne for two kings. And if Jesus is being proclaimed as king as he enters into Jerusalem and the temple authorities catch on to what is happening, there will be a clash and as we go throughout the week, a clash there will be.

As the kingdom of God breaks into the world in the hope of restoring and redeeming the world, clearly there will be conflict. In fact, this is exactly what many of his disciples and followers were hoping for. They were hoping that Jesus would call upon a legion of angels who would come down and destroy the Roman Occupiers once and for all, in the same way that Moses led the Israelites through the Red Sea and God drowned Pharaoh and his army. There are some New Testament scholars that suggest the reason Judas sold Jesus out was not because Judas wanted to do him in, but because many believed he was a zealot, and that by tipping off the soldiers, he would be pushing the hand of God to bring about the great revolution. But alas, he was misguided. In fact, in the end, all the male disciples were misguided as they one by one

abandon Jesus on his way to the cross. “Hosannas” become “Crucify him!” Jesus doesn’t fulfill the expectations placed had upon him. There are no legions of angels. There is no divine army from heaven. There is no successful violent overthrow. There is no crushing of the enemy. Instead, the dream sparked by Jesus’ triumphal entry is crushed with each succeeding strike of the hammer as Jesus is nailed to the cross with a mocking sign that reads, “King of the Jews.”

How could this happen? How could this be the Son the David, the Messiah, the true King of Kings?

At the beginning of Lent, many of us began our Lenten Journey with the mark of the cross in ashes on our forehead and by hearing the words, “From dust you came, and to dust you shall return.” As I have grown in my own faith and understanding over the years, this act of remembering my mortality, as much as I resist it, serves and allows me to further embrace my humanity, which means accepting my time on earth as finite. As a pastor and father, one of the most humbly and challenging acts was the first time I marked ashes on Isaiah’s head, at a mere 2 months old, reminding me that even these little ones can’t escape this reality. While remembering we are mortal might sound dark or morbid, I’m becoming ever more convinced that all our Empire Building, all of our need to hoard and control others and all the variables

in life, is deeply rooted in our fear of death and ultimately our mistrust in God. Thus, our very human temptation is to become like God; powerful, mighty, conqueror of enemies, and especially the enemy of death. If we can just fortify everything and remove all risk and chance and unknowns in life, we will be safe. This fear feeds the anxiety so rampant in our world today, a fear that existed long before Covid-19 showed up, and becomes the very fodder that feeds the rise of populist movements and dictatorships across the globe. It is in these movements, rooted in the fears of our vulnerabilities, that we hand over our freedom and agency to the Strong One, like the Romans, who will keep us “safe” with their version (vision) of peace and security.

Jesus, on the other hand, the one who is equal to God in stature, as Philippians 2 states, fully embraces his humanity. He empties himself. Takes on the form of a slave, the most oppressed. Is born in human likeness and being found in human form, humbles himself, and trusts God to the point of death, even death on a cross. And in so doing, God exalts and makes Jesus name above every name. Revealing to us the very nature of God and embracing the fullness of what it means to be human.

To borrow an image from the book of Job, today, our “hedges of protection” are being trimmed away. We are certainly moving into an

unknown and uncertain future. On one hand, we are witnessing a tremendous act of global solidarity, and on the other hand, many are wondering what it means to close up shop, to not hug grandchildren and visit neighbours, to not gather together in worship and to view others as potential carriers. In the last few weeks, over 1.5 million Canadians have applied for EI, and that number is expected to rise significantly. Small business owners are wondering if they will be able to pay rent this month, as with everyday Canadians. Some are concerned that 1/3 of Canadian charities will close their doors permanently if this goes too long and still others are wondering where they will eat, as schools often provide breakfast and lunch and food banks are struggling to find volunteers and donors to feed the hungry. As Doug Klassen shared a few weeks ago, we are experiencing an apocalyptic event, but not in the popular sense of the term. This is apocalyptic in the true sense of the word; a great revealing is taking place. Much is being revealed about what is important, and what isn't. We are being reminded that as complex our "systems" are, they are fragile. We are seeing the importance of the "little people," and by that I mean the grocers, the farmers, the field workers, the truck drivers and train engineers that bring food to our cities and town, and the front line care workers that give of themselves and put their lives at risk, not only today and during this pandemic, but often many days, when people are dying, or feeling lonely, struggling with memory and just plain frustration. And ultimately



we are seeing how deeply interconnected we truly are, from across the street, to around the world, and that we cannot truly ever be isolated.

As these hedges of protection are being peeled back, we are afraid of the void that we will find. And yet, as we move through this holiest of weeks, and the curtain of mystery is revealed to the world, we will see it is not only small little me against the dark void of chaos, but rather, we will see the Crucified Christ there before us, standing there with us, fulfilling the words of Psalm 139, that not even in the depths of Sheol will God leave us forsaken and without his presence. For, as Paul writes to the early church, “who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or pandemic, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors, through him who loved us. For I am convinced neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present to come, no powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen. And Amen.