

"Arrived"

Rev. Jeff Bacon

March 28, 2021

Let's join our hearts together in prayer. Let us pray: **Gracious and loving God, as we join the Christian parade, waving palm branches to honour Jesus, open our hearts to the truth of our celebration. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.**

Jesus has arrived! And he receives an amazing welcome to Jerusalem! It's a welcome fit for a king: a new king who is about to set the people free from the oppression of Rome; set the people free from the punitive taxes, from the fear, from the constant crucifixions. The people welcome Jesus as their Saviour, who with the miraculous power of God, will vanquish their oppressors and set them free. Which he does – but not in the way they imagine on that day he is jubilantly welcomed to Jerusalem; that day we're celebrating today as Palm Sunday.

Our gospel message today is included in all four gospels, which indicates the importance of the event for the Church's early understanding of Jesus. Jesus arranges for, and then rides, a young donkey, a colt, into Jerusalem and the people throw their cloaks and palm branches on the ground for the donkey to walk upon. It's a welcome to Jerusalem that's truly fit for a king, for in Second Kings, when Jehu is anointed as king over Israel, "they all took their cloaks and spread them for him on the bare steps." The euphoric welcome of Jesus to Jerusalem is an important event that begins our Holy Week, but it seems strangely comical, like an orchestrated parody or political satire lampooning the authorities and it doesn't seem to fit our picture of Jesus; our understanding of Jesus as a wise teacher and humble healer.

Something strange sometimes happens in crowds; the development of a mob mentality. It can be euphoric, like at a famous rock concert. Or it can be destructive, like at a political demonstration or a soccer match that turns into a riot. Passions are inflamed, immediate action is demanded, charisma trumps substance and passion trumps reason. The euphoric crowds welcoming Jesus to Jerusalem will become frustrated and cry for his crucifixion by Friday.

Major family gatherings for the holidays, or family celebrations, or big parades can also be like that, bringing out both hopes for the future and the tensions of today. Hopefully, this year we'll have a Santa Claus Parade, with marching bands, beautiful floats and the excitement and anticipation of Santa's arrival at the end of the parade. Christmas peace and goodwill will abound. But then, someone steps on your foot; someone arrives late and stands right in front of you and your kids; someone is using rude and inappropriate language. It can turn a euphoric celebration into frustration and fury. And when Christmas Day finally arrives amidst great expectations, old family feuds sometimes surface and the joy drains out of what is supposed to be the happiest family celebration of the year. Some people dread big gatherings because the expectations that are raised cannot possibly be met and they invariably lead to disappointment.

The big Passover gathering was approaching. Passover is a major Jewish festival that focuses on God's liberation of the people from slavery in Egypt, and crowds of jubilant pilgrims were arriving to celebrate in Jerusalem. Mark describes Jesus arriving on the road from the Mount of Olives to the Temple. When he reaches Bethphage and Bethany, which are two small neighbouring villages on the southeastern slope of the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples to get a colt that he knew would be tied up and waiting. Bethphage was considered the outermost reach of the

city of Jerusalem; it's the stated limit for a journey on the Sabbath; and it's the furthest point away that bread could be baked for the Temple. Nearby Bethany is where Mary and Martha and Lazarus lived and where Jesus raised Lazarus from death to new life. Jesus, the miracle worker, knew this area well and had friends and followers living there.

The donkey was a common animal for riding upon; a humble animal for a humble passenger. But a colt that had never been ridden was young and pure, suitable for ceremonial use. And rather than a horse, which would suggest military strength, a prince would ride upon a donkey as a sign of peaceful intentions. Jesus is the pure, humble Prince of Peace.

The acclamation of the crowds is like what Lorraine read in Psalm 118: "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" Psalm 118 is a traditional part of the liturgy for the celebration of Passover and the applicability to Jesus is amazing. Psalm 118 is about God's steadfast love in the face of fear, danger, even death. God's love endures forever. And the appropriate response is thanksgiving, for "this is the day that God has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it!" According to Jewish tradition, Psalm 118 was likely sung at Jesus' last Passover meal – his last supper. Later tradition also associated with Jesus, the verse, "the stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone."

As a grandfather to Lily who just turned one and to Wesley who's about 2½, I identify with the kind grandfather whose young grandson is jumping up and down in his playpen, crying at the top of his voice. When the young boy saw his grandfather, he reached up his little hands and said, "Out, Gramps, out."

It was only natural for the grandfather to reach down to lift the little fellow out of his playpen; but as he reached down, the child's mother

intervened and said to her son, "No. You are being punished, so you must stay where you are." The grandfather was at a loss for what to do. The child's tears and little hands reached deep into his heart, but the mother's firmness in correcting her son for misbehaving could not be taken lightly. This is a problem of love versus law, and love finds a way. The grandfather could not take the boy out of the playpen, so Gramps crawled into the playpen with him. Through Jesus, God has crawled into our playpen.

Jesus' triumphant messianic entry into Jerusalem riding on a young donkey is the ridiculous scene of Jesus crawling into our playpen. And "the one who comes in the name of the Lord" will be the suffering and humiliated stone that the builders rejected. What initially seems like political satire is the Prince of Peace entering Jerusalem as the honoured Jesus, who by Friday will be the rejected Jesus, the humiliated Jesus, the crucified Jesus. And after three days of fear and grieving, will be the resurrected Jesus, the Saviour Jesus, the hope, peace, joy and love Jesus. Jesus is the chief cornerstone of our Christian faith and he has arrived in Jerusalem! Thanks be to God. Amen.