

The Day Jesus Wept for the City

April 10, 2022 Sermon by Stephen Portner

Luke 19:28-48

²⁸ After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

That is, after Jesus told a penetrating parable on the talents where he said, “To all those who have, more will be given; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away” (Luke 19:26). And then he closes the parable with a startling and harsh ending: “But as for these enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them—bring them here and slaughter them in my presence” (Luke 19:27). It was after that, that Jesus entered Jerusalem as a king would.

²⁹ As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, ³⁰ “Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹ If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ say, ‘The Lord needs it.’”

³² Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. ³³ As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?”

³⁴ They replied, “The Lord needs it.”

At this point in Jesus’ ministry, he is quite well known. All he needed to do was send two of his disciples ahead of him, inform the owner of a donkey that the Lord needs it, and the donkey would be released into their care and use. This was to be the fulfillment of the prophecy in Zechariah 9:9, which speaks of royalty coming “triumphantly and victorious ...humble and riding on a donkey.”

A king could enter a city on the back of a mighty stallion, and that would mean he comes to conquer the city. But if a king entered a city on the back of a donkey, it meant that he was coming to bring peace.

³⁵ They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. ³⁶ As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road.

In this way the people were giving Jesus the royal treatment. Their cloaks being laid on the donkey and their cloaks being laid on the road were the equivalent today of rolling out the red carpet. They were excited that Jesus was coming to their city, and they were doing all they could to make him feel welcome. And to feel welcome as a king.

37 When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen:

38 “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”

Those words may have been recited as part of the Passover tradition as people entered the town of Jerusalem. This was a high holy day for the Jews, when they celebrated Passover, the day their people were freed from slavery from the Egyptians. Pilgrims, that is, people who were making their way into the city to approach the Temple of Jerusalem, would often sing these words from Psalm 118:25-26.

Other gospel accounts tell us that the crowd was waving palm branches, which were the equivalent of waving our national flag today. The last people who had reigned as Israelite kings were the Maccabees. And they had imprinted on the back of their currency a palm branch as a sign of their liberation and independence from the oppressors of their day. Jesus’ riding into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey with all these people shouting, singing, waving palm branches, and calling Jesus, “the king who comes in the name of the Lord” could have been readily interpreted as a call for rebellion against the Roman Empire. If word got out to the Roman soldiers that there was an uprising at hand, there would be a riot and a lot of deaths. Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem was making a number of the religious leaders present very nervous.

39 Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!”

40 “I tell you,” he replied, “if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”

The Pharisees were worried about a riot from the people. But Jesus informed them that even if the people were kept quiet, the very stones would shout out. Such was the power of the Messiah riding into the town humbly on the back of a donkey. Here was meekness and majesty, humility and power, all wrapped up in one.

One would think that as Jesus was riding in the midst of this crowd that he would have been jubilant. They were singing. They were shouting. They were calling him king. Jesus could have called for a revolution right then and there, and the crowd of people would have followed without question. Yet, according to the gospel of Luke, Jesus was not happy at all. Here, Luke gives us a rare insight into how Jesus was truly feeling.

41 As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it ⁴² and said, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes.

Jesus wept over the city. Why? Because of their hard-heartedness. That very day they had the One who would bring them peace riding in their very midst, and yet they did not see Jesus as he truly was. They were expecting a military leader who would vanquish their foes, the Roman Empire. Instead, he was riding into town on the back of a donkey,

coming to bring them peace as only he could give them. He was coming as their Savior. He truly would answer their plea for “Hosanna,” meaning, “Save us now.” But he would save them, not by leading armies to overthrow their oppressors, but by dying upon a cross like a criminal in order to put to death the power of sin.

As Jesus wept for what was hidden from their sight, he uttered a prophetic word:

⁴³ The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. ⁴⁴ They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you.”

And indeed, that day would come. Less than forty years from this prophecy, the city of Jerusalem would fall to the invading force of the Roman Empire that would put an end to the Jewish rebellion once and for all. They would leave the Temple so totally destroyed that there would not be left one stone atop another.

Not only did Jesus enter into Jerusalem being sad, he entered the Temple being mad!

⁴⁵ When Jesus entered the temple courts, he began to drive out those who were selling. ⁴⁶ “It is written,” he said to them, “My house will be a house of prayer”; but you have made it ‘a den of robbers.’”

⁴⁷ Every day he was teaching at the temple. But the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the leaders among the people were trying to kill him. ⁴⁸ Yet they could not find any way to do it, because all the people hung on his words.

This was the second time that Jesus had driven the money changers out of the Temple. The gospel of John records Jesus cleansing the Temple at the very beginning of his earthly ministry. It had not seemed to make much of an impact on the people selling wares in the Temple, because here they were again selling sacrifices in the courtyard and cheating people when they exchanged their foreign currency with the currency used in Temple worship. Not only were they cheating people but they were hawking their wares and raising a hubbub of noise in the courtyard, which was the only place that non-Jewish people could come to worship. Jesus cleansed the temple once again, and then proceeded to teach the people every day until Roman soldiers were sent to arrest him.

Interestingly enough, Jesus accused the moneychangers and the sacrifice sellers of being thieves. Less than a week later Jesus would be crucified between two thieves, one of whom would be promised that he would be with Jesus in paradise. The religious people, the so-called righteous people, were referred to as thieves, and the thief was guaranteed a place in paradise. Jesus truly is the Lord of great reversals.

On the very day we would expect Jesus to rejoice, he was instead filled with sadness and anger. I have often pondered that as a curious thing. He looked upon the hard-

heartedness of people who would not accept him for who he was, people who should have known better. And so, Jesus wept for his city.

I like what Erwin McManus wrote about this:

Jesus knew what had been lost to that city. They were supposed to be the city of God, pointing the world to the love and hope and life intended by their Creator. Instead, they became a city of corruption and greed and empty religion. The very people who were to lead the world to freedom now used their privilege to hold them captive. They had forgotten who they were. They had forgotten who God was. They would not recognize Jesus as the Messiah because they would not even recognize God if he were standing right in front of them. Jesus understood the implication of their choices. His heart was broken for them.

He could easily have wept for himself, knowing that his love had been rejected. He could have wept that his love was unrequited. But he didn't. His tears were for those whose who did not know they should be crying.¹

How often have you wept for your city? How often have you felt profound sadness for all the people who live in your community who have not received Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior? How often have you wept for people who did not know they should be crying?

I think of all the people who are living in anger with their neighbors, people who prefer to live in hatred, bitterness, and loneliness because they refuse to believe. I think of people whose funerals I have officiated over who could have cared less about the church and following Jesus Christ while they were alive. I think about all the things many churches in the area used to do but now are incapable or unable to do because of lack of interest – choirs singing, puppet shows being offered, dinners and concerts that proclaimed the Lord's good news, youth groups, mission teams, churches full to capacity – and a feeling of emptiness comes over me that is just overwhelming. At times I feel like I am officiating over a funeral service for an entire community that refuses to believe – and I feel an emptiness and sadness so profound that I get choked up and tears begin to form. I wonder, what needs to be said? What needs to be done? What will cause people to awake from this slumber that lulls them to death and prevents them from receiving the meaning of life? And when I stop long enough to contemplate these things, then I begin to appreciate why Jesus wept when he looked upon his city. He wanted to save them but instead they would reject him.

The triumphal entry would lead to a very emotional week for Jesus, a week often referred to as Passion week for all the emotion it would contain. Jesus knew that his entry into Jerusalem would end with him dying upon a cross before the week was done. And yet he came to Jerusalem anyway. He did it for us, because he loves us that much. That proves God's amazing grace for us. Amen.

¹ Erwin Raphael McManus, *The Genius of Jesus*, pp. 67-68.