

### The Triumphal Entry That Wasn't

This day marked the culmination of a long journey. To find its beginning, you have to go way back to Luke 9:51. That's where we read this: "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem." He set his face? Doesn't exactly sound like he wanted to go, does it? Didn't matter whether or not he wanted to. He knew that he had to. It was the only way.

For the next ten chapters, the heart of Luke's gospel, Jesus is slowly making his way to Jerusalem, his rag-tag band of disciples in tow. Some of his best teachings happened while he was on that journey. He told some of his most mind-blowing parables: The Good Samaritan. The Prodigal Son. It's like he was eager to sow those seeds of God's Kingdom while he still had time. He hoped they would remember every word.

He told them the Parable of the Rich Fool, and followed that up by telling them not to worry about their life, what they will eat, what they will wear. Strive for God's kingdom, Jesus said, and these things will be given to you as well. And then to prove it they would spend another night in a stranger's home, eating the food offered them. While their hosts ate up every word he uttered, as if they had never really heard words before.

He knew what would happen to him in Jerusalem. He even hinted at it repeatedly. "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!" They had no idea he was talking about his death. They thought he was preaching radical revolution.

You can hardly blame them, given some of the things he said. "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" And they would privately picture him riding a horse, a sword in his right hand, leading an army of thousands. "Yes," they said. "Yes!" It's no surprise that the crowd following him grew daily.

There were those Pharisees who tried to warn him. "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." That made his closest disciples a little nervous at first. But then they loved his sassy reply: "Go and tell that fox for me, Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work . . . And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'" He was quoting scripture! It was that Psalm about the Davidic King, the Messiah who would come and deliver them from their enemies. "Save us, we beseech you, O Lord. O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!" Hosanna! the congregation cried in the Psalm.

"Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." A cross? For a brief moment that brought them up short, until someone in the crowd said, "He surely means a sword. He didn't mean a cross, but a sword." And that seemed to satisfy them.

By now they were getting very close to Jerusalem. And when they reached the village of Bethany, on the Mount of Olives, he sent two of them ahead with an odd request. "You will find a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" Someone in the crowd knew their scripture exceptionally well, and said, "That's from the prophet Zechariah! Check this out. '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. He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.” “Yes,” those standing near the man said. “Yes!!” As if they completely missed or misunderstood or ignored that one word “humble.” The whole passage turned on that word.

By this time the two disciples were back with the donkey, just as he had said. “How did he know?” murmured several. “It must be one of his special powers,” someone answered. “You should have seen some of the miracles he’s pulled off.” “You mean the people he’s healed? Oh, we’ve seen them. He’s the real deal!”

Someone spread their cloak across the donkey’s back, and another offered his hand to Jesus to help him mount the animal. Jesus accepted the hand, and climbed on the donkey’s back. “This is it!” Someone shouted. “He’s doing it. This is his royal procession, his triumphal entry, just like the prophet predicted! This is the triumphant hour of victory!” Then others took their cloaks off and laid them along the path, just like their ancestors had laid cloaks for their newly anointed King Jehu centuries ago. “Now there was a king! Do you think Jesus will kill the idolaters singlehandedly, as King Jehu did?” “I don’t know, but I hope so!” “Save us, we beseech you! Hosanna, hosanna!” The chanting grew louder and louder. “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”

Immediately several Pharisees burst forth from the crowd and urged Jesus, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop. If the Roman soldiers catch wind of this, we’ll all be in big trouble!” But Jesus just shook his head. “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

“Hosanna!” the crowd continued chanting. “Save us, we beseech you.” “Yes,” others shouted. “Yes!”

The ruckus began to lose energy when he was about half-way down from the Mount of Olives, approaching the east gate into Jerusalem. Maybe it was because someone finally noticed that Jesus didn’t have a sword in his hand. That his shoulders were bowed as if under a heavy burden. That he didn’t really look much like a king after all. It was as if someone had let all the air out of a large balloon. The disappointed and disillusioned crowd slowly began to peel away, until all that remained were about, oh, twelve of his disciples, shaking their heads, one of whom could be seen wiping a tear from his eye. “I thought he was the one,” he said to another. “I would have sworn he was the one!”

In retrospect, they should have known he wasn’t the one. That is, the triumphant and victorious king they were expecting. It was right there in the Psalm. “The stone that the builder’s rejected has become the cornerstone.”

Rejected he would be. They, the crowds, would reject him. The very same crowd that one moment hailed him as king would one day soon turn their backs on him and walk away.

People can be so fickle. They think they know what they want. They want a leader who will make their nation great again. Someone who will build walls to keep all the undesireables out. Especially the Arabs. Someone who will enforce the law, and make up new laws whenever it suits him. Even if some of the laws seemed a little, well, off. “It’s okay,” they rationalized. “We wanted a strong leader. At long last we have one.” And as long as their own lives are comfortable, they turn a blind eye to everything else.

History has known such leaders. Sometimes by just a single name. Saul. Nero. Adolf. Josef. Who will be next? Someone named Donald?

[Read the confession and words of assurance, followed by the hymn “In Christ Alone.”]