

TRIUMPH OR TRAGEDY?

by Ray C. Stedman

John's account of our Lord's so-called triumphal entry into the city of Jerusalem is very brief:

The next day a great crowd who had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes In the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!" And Jesus found a young ass and sat upon it; as it is written, "Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on an ass's colt!" {John 12:12-15 RSV}

The traditional view of this event is that it was a well-deserved recognition by our Lord of his Messiahship; that at last he was receiving a proper welcome as a King, in fulfillment of the prophecy of Zechariah which is quoted here. The crowd cried out, "Hosanna!" which means, "Save us now!" They saw him as a conqueror and acknowledged him to be the king of Israel. Most of us have grown up with the traditional idea that this was indeed a moment of joy and triumph for our Lord; that he was at last being received as he ought to be.

But that is to misunderstand what is happening here. Many of us have learned more from tradition than from Scripture, and tradition is usually grossly distorted. A reading of the other gospels makes clear that this was not actually a welcome by the inhabitants of Jerusalem. John himself tells us in Verse 12, "a great crowd who had come to the Feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem." These people who welcomed Jesus were not residents of the city, but pilgrims, in the city for the feast, many of them perhaps from other countries. In fact, in Matthew's account of this incident, he says that the whole city was stirred when they saw this procession coming down the Mount of Olives. But instead of joining in the "Hosannas!" they suspiciously asked, "Who is this?" The crowd making up the procession had to inform them, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth."

No one seems to have truly understood the nature of this event, as John makes evident in the next verses:

His disciples did not understand this at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that this had been written of him and had been done to him. The crowd that had been with him when he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead bore witness. The reason why the crowd went to meet him was that they had heard he had done this sign. The Pharisees said to one another, "You see that you can do nothing; look, the world has gone after him." {John 12:16-19 RSV}

Even the disciples were bewildered by this turn of events. They had been with Jesus in Galilee when the crowd had tried to crown him king following the feeding of the five thousand, but he would have nothing to do with that. Here, however, they see he is willing to receive the plaudits of the crowd. They must have been very confused at what was going on. In fact, we are told they did not know what this meant until after Jesus was glorified.

Here also was the bedazzled multitude, caught up with the exciting news that Jesus had raised a man who had been dead four days. They were all anxious to see the Wonderworker who had done this amazing thing. Then there were the belligerent Pharisees who had decided (we learn from the other gospels) not to take Jesus prisoner during the Passover feast because they feared the reaction of the multitude. But now, as they see the whole populace seemingly swept along by this appearance of Jesus, they say, "You see that you can do nothing (i.e., their plans to delay arresting Jesus were unavailing); look, the whole world has gone after him." This event changed their schedule. They had to act now.

So not only is this not a welcome to the city of Jerusalem, it's not even a spontaneous demonstration. Most of us have felt that when Jesus appeared the crowd became excited and spontaneously began to break the branches off the palm trees to welcome him. But a careful reading of all four gospels indicates that this was a carefully planned demonstration, orchestrated by none other than Jesus himself! He was the one who was timing events according to his schedule. The other gospels indicate that he had made arrangements weeks in advance for a donkey to be available to him, He told the disciples they would find an ass with its colt tied beside it. "Loose them and bring them

both to me" {cf, Matt 21:2}, he told them. "If anybody asks you what you are doing, tell them, "The Lord needs them," {cf, Matt 21:3}. This is exactly what happened. It is clear that some weeks earlier, during a quick visit to Jerusalem, he had made these arrangements. During that visit he also arranged to rent a room in which he and his disciples would celebrate the Passover together. And he had known weeks or months, perhaps even years earlier, the exact day when this would take place.

How did Jesus know that? Well, he knew that the prophet Zechariah had predicted that Messiah would come, riding into the city on a colt which no man had ever ridden. That is a remarkable feat in itself. I speak from experience, having grown up in Montana and having ridden colts which had never been ridden before. I even broke horses occasionally. I once got on a two-year-old colt which had never been ridden and I remained on him about two-and-a-half seconds! But so complete was our Lord's control that this unriden colt behaved as meekly as if he had often been ridden.

More than the prophecy of Zechariah, however, Jesus had read in the ninth chapter of Daniel, in one of the most amazing prophetic passages of the Old Testament, that a special period of 490 years of Jewish history would begin to run its course when the command was given to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem following the Babylonian captivity. When 483 of those years had elapsed, Messiah, the Prince, would then be presented to his people. Two very interesting books by Sir Robert Anderson, "Messiah the Prince," and "Daniel the Prophet," trace the fulfillment of this prophecy, pointing out that on the very day when Jesus rode into Jerusalem 483 years had elapsed from the time of the issuing of the commandment to build the walls of Jerusalem! This was a strategic day in the history of Israel. Our Lord was fully aware of it and that is why he had chosen this day.

Not only was this not a spontaneous demonstration, it was not even a triumphal entry. Although it had all the outward appearances of one, it was far from that in our Lord's thoughts. We find proof of that in these words from Chapter 19 of Luke's gospel: "And when he drew near and saw the city he wept over it," {cf, Luke 19:41}.

When he came over the brow of the mountain and saw the city spread beneath him, tears rolled down his cheeks. Not only was he not happy or excited, rejoicing in the acclamation of the multitude, he was actually weeping. He then said,

"Would that even today [note the special significance that day] you knew the things that make for peace! But now they are hid from your eyes. For the days shall come upon you, when your enemies will cast up a bank about you and surround you, and hem you in on every side, and dash you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave one stone upon another in you; because you did not know the time of your visitation." {Luke 19:42-44 RSV}

They did not believe the calendar of events which Daniel the prophet had outlined would occur. Jesus uses this occasion to predict the coming of the Romans, 40 years later, and the destruction of Jerusalem, exactly in line with his words. That is hardly a triumphal entry.

I remember watching on television the return of General Douglas MacArthur to San Francisco following his years of being the virtual overlord of Japan. A holiday was declared and the whole city turned out to greet him. Streamers and confetti were strewn about everywhere as MacArthur rode in a car along Market Street. As the camera focused on his face, I noted the quiet pride and the warm response to the enthusiasm of the crowd reflected in it. That was truly a Triumphal Entry.

But this was a tearful entry by Jesus. He was coming as King, not to receive a throne, but in tears to pronounce a sentence of judgment upon the nation. The other gospels say that he went immediately to the temple. Standing there, having once again cleansed it of the greedy moneychangers, he pronounced these words, "Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. You will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord,'" {cf, Luke 13:35 RSV}. According to John's account, that is what the crowd coming down the mountainside had been saying. But that was a crowd of strangers, not the residents of Jerusalem.

It's interesting that even today the Jews welcome those whom they regard as their deliverers by calling them the king of Israel. When Menachim Begin was prime minister of Israel, on several occasions crowds gathered outside his residence and called out to him in these words, "Ha melech Yisrael!" (the king of Israel). Just the other day,

following his return to Jerusalem at the conclusion of his libel suit in New York, Ariel Sharon was welcomed in the same words by many of those who greeted him.

But when Jesus came, in fulfillment of the prophecies that he would come as King, he was not riding on a war horse but on a donkey, a symbol of peace. His only scepter was a broken reed, his only crown a crown of thorns, his only throne a bloody cross. This whole scene is telling us that outward appearance means nothing to God when the heart is defiled and unyielded to him.

That is why John goes on immediately to link this with another event which probably occurred a day or two later in this strategic week -- the visit of certain Greeks to the feast:

Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. So these came to Philip who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew went with Philip and they told Jesus. And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. {John 12:20-24 RSV}

The disciples must have been amazed at this reaction of our Lord. These Greeks probably had come into contact with the teaching of the Old Testament, drawn by its purity, its monotheism, its clear message of the nature and the greatness of God. Though they had not become Jews they did go up to the feast to celebrate along with the Jews. Remember that the outer courts of the temple were called "the courts of the Gentiles." Many Gentiles would go up at times like this to celebrate, although they could not go beyond those courts on pain of their life. These Greeks picked out the two disciples who had Greek names, Philip and Andrew. Philip, we are told, was from Bethsaida, on the northern side of the lake of Galilee, the area where the Gentiles had most fully settled. These were sincere people, not curious tourists, who said to Philip, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

Preachers often see this phrase written inside pulpits, offered as a message that hopefully reflects the desires of the congregation. I have seen these words in many pulpits and have been humbled and challenged by them.

Here, however, these words awaken an unusual response from Jesus. He has not been pleased by the triumphal entry, but when he hears that a group of Gentiles want to see him, his response is remarkable. Immediately he declares, "The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified!" Several times in this gospel we have heard Jesus say "My hour has not yet come." When his mother came to him at the wedding at Cana and asked him to help with a problem he said to her, "Woman, ... my hour has not yet come," {John 2:4 RSV}. He did not mean he would not help her, because he did. He meant that what he would do would not accomplish what she desired because his time had not yet come. On several other occasions he made the same point. But the moment he hears of these Gentiles wanting to see him he responds in these words, "The hour has come..."

He goes on to utter words introduced by what I have described as *the formula of focused attention*: "Truly, truly, I say to you." When you see these words, pay close attention to what follows. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone." What does he mean by that? He is talking about himself. He is the grain of wheat. Unless he is willing to die, unless he goes to the cross, which he seems looming in the immediate foreground now, his whole purpose in coming to earth will have been wasted, he will remain alone. "But if it dies, it bears much fruit." He sees these Greeks as the first fruits, the symbol of the great harvest of earth for which he came.

Perhaps he thought something like this: "These Greeks have asked to see me. What does it mean to 'see me'?" Picture a grain of wheat in your mind. Can you see that grain, so tiny, so obvious? Outwardly you can see what it is, but can you really see it? No. In order to see it you have to plant it in the cold, dark earth. If you watch it, eventually a green sprout will appear, then the blade, then the plant, then the stem, and finally a head. At last it turns golden; the harvest has come. But have you seen everything in that grain of wheat? No, not yet. You must plant those grains again and again. At last, when you stand one day beside a shimmering field of wheat, rippling in the breeze, golden in the sunshine, you can say you have seen a grain of wheat. You have seen all the possibilities of it; all of it has been unfolded and now is visible to the eye. That is what Jesus meant. The world would not see the full outcome of his work and his life until he went to the cross.

If he had not died we probably would not know any more about him than we know of any other great religious

leader, like Buddha, Mohammed, or Confucius. We may not have heard of him at all, so meager were the results of his teaching. Only a relative handful stood with him to the end. Because of the cross he was able to do something he could never have done otherwise: He was able to share his life with millions of people. How do we explain men like Luther, Calvin, Knox, Zwingli and others who changed the entire Western world during their lifetime? How do we explain the impact of men like the Wesley brothers? In our own day, how do we explain the change in the hatchet-man of the Nixon administration, Charles Colson, who is now changing the prison system of this country in the name of Jesus? How do we explain Solzenityn, Mother Teresa, and millions who daily evidence an altered life, a changed outlook? All has come about because of the cross of Christ. God is saying to us in this account that the only way to true glory is to die.

Jesus applies this to us in the next two verses:

"He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If any one serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also [the servant will not be any different than Jesus; he will have to go the way Jesus went]; if any one serves me, the Father will honor him." {John 12:25-26 RSV}

Here is the great Christian paradox, the unmistakable mark of an authentic gospel: It begins with dying, with a cross. If the gospel that you hear preached on the radio, the television, or wherever, does not begin with a cross, does not begin by telling you that something in you has to die, it is not the true gospel. This is the identifying mark. How these words of Jesus cut across the philosophy of life today! Every television program, every magazine, every popular song, all present the philosophy, "Your life is your own! Live it the way you please! Watch out for No. 1! Do your own thing! Live so that you can join with Frank Sinatra singing, 'I Did It My Way!'" But Jesus declares that if you follow that philosophy you will lose everything. Life will slip through your fingers no matter what you do. You can gain all the material abundance you could ever wish for, the plaudits of the crowd, recognition by the whole world, but if you live that way you will end up with nothing; your life will be a total waste of time.

"He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life." That doesn't mean you have to hate yourself. It means you must recognize that living for yourself will never supply what you really want out of life. Only as you surrender to the Lordship of Christ can that be brought about. That is why the gospel includes a cross, and why the cross has become the symbol of Christian faith. If the message you are hearing today does not begin there, then it's a false gospel. If you are being told that the way to gain a deep and wonderful sense of self-esteem is to simply come to Jesus and let him build you up and make you feel good about yourself you are not hearing the gospel of Jesus Christ. It does not begin that way. It starts with a cross.

Let me share with you the words of Dr. A. W. Tozer, the great preacher of a few decades ago:

The cross is the symbol of death. It stands for the abrupt, violent end of the human being. The man in Roman times who took up his cross and started down the road had already said goodbye to his friends. He was not coming back. He was not going out to have his life redirected. He was going out to have it ended. The cross made no compromise, modified nothing, spared nothing. It slew all of the man completely and for good. It did not try to keep on good terms with its victim. It struck swift and hard and when it had finished its work the man was no more. That evangelism which draws friendly parallels between the ways of God and the ways of man is false to the Bible and cruel to the soul of the hearers. The faith of Christ does not parallel the world. It intersects it. In coming to Christ we do not bring our life up on to a higher plane. We leave it at a cross. The grain of wheat must fall into the ground and die. That is the beginning of the gospel.

Also it's not the end. The end is, "If it dies, it bears much fruit." That is where life begins. There is a life we are all born with that must end. It is a self-centered life, that thinks only of itself, seeks advantage for itself, is ambitious and proud. That life has to die. That is the beginning of the gospel. But if it dies, then another life takes its place, a life that is gracious, loving, lovely, peaceful, filled with joy, gladness and a deep sense of self-esteem, knowing who it is and what it was made to be. That is the rest of the gospel. You cannot reverse these two, although people try to. They jump immediately to the end of the gospel -- life in Christ -- without first going to the cross. But that cannot be. Jesus said so: "If any one serves me he must follow me, and where I am there shall my servant be also. He must go where I've gone."

In terms of daily, practical experience, what does Jesus mean, "He who comes after me must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me"? {cf, Luke 9:23}. What does it mean to bear your cross daily? It means two

things: First, it means a once-for-all decision; and secondly, a continuing series of choices. That is what the cross stands for:

First, it is a surrender of the rule of your life to Jesus. It is a recognition that your life is not your own. The key words of the Christian faith are, "You are not your own, you are bought with a price," {cf, 1 Cor 6:19b-20a}. Actually, you never were your own. That is an illusion that the world is perpetrating upon us through the media. They tell us that we belong to ourselves, that we have a right to ourselves. That is a lie. It's not true. It never was. "You are not your own; you are bought with a price."

This is the beginning of true life:

- To recognize that fact,
- To surrender your claim to yourself,
- To give up your right to run your own affairs, and
- To surrender to the Lordship of Jesus,
 - To do what he says, and
 - To stop what he says to stop.

That hurts. It cancels out your own plans. It confounds your ambitions at times. It feels like death. It is death; it's a form of dying.

It also means to daily follow up on that decision. Keep doing what is right. Stop doing what is wrong, and do it all in the strength of Jesus' love and companionship! The result is that you will truly begin to live. New power will come, to do what is right. New joy will be yours, an inner peace that nothing can take away, a new ability to love even those you could not love before, because a new life is yours. You have found a new Lordship and a new life.

Our Lord uses this symbol of a grain of wheat not only of himself but of everyone who follows him. Have you ever heard a grain of wheat talking to itself? I'm going to stretch your imagination a little and ask you to imagine a grain of wheat looking at itself, admiring itself. So round, so brown, so fully packed, and saying to itself, "This philosophy I hear asks me to fall into that dark, cold ground and lose myself. I don't want to do that. I like myself. I want to stay what I am. I want to hang on to myself, I want to be myself."

Does that sound familiar?

If the grain of wheat wants to remain the same, it has that right. But, according to the word of Jesus, it will never change. Three thousand-year-old grains of wheat found in the tombs of the Pharaohs were found to be absolutely the same as any grain of wheat today. In fact, when they were planted they began to grow. They were totally unchanged for 3,000 years or more.

But supposing the grain of wheat said, "Well, I'm told there is more to come, a lot more than I'm experiencing, and the only way I can have it is to fall into that dark ground and die. So I guess I'll do it." And it does so. It falls into the ground and is covered up. It's dark and unpleasant there. The grain of wheat begins to think, "What a fool I was! Why did I ever listen to that idea? Look what's happened to me! I don't like this at all." But then it begins to feel a tickle on its back. It turns around and sees a white sprout coming out. It says, "What is this that's happening? I didn't anticipate this at all. I've got to hold a committee meeting with myself and decide what to do about this. I'm in charge. I've got to determine whether that thing is going to go sideways, up or down, or whatever."

While it's trying to determine that, it discovers there is a hidden lordship which began to take over the moment it fell into the ground. This lordship directs the process quite apart from what the grain of wheat may feel, directing that a certain part goes down, while another part goes up and soon breaks through into the sunlight. Then the grain begins to say, "Oh, this is better. I'm beginning to enjoy this. It's not as bad as I thought." The sprout comes, then the blade, then the stalk, and finally the head. The grain of wheat says, "I feel fulfilled." (Filled full, is the idea.) Then those grains in the head fall into the ground and they go through the process again and again until at last a great, shimmering field of wheat is growing, beautiful, rippling and golden in the sun. The grain of wheat says, "Ah, this is life as it was intended to be." Fruitful -- that is what the end of the gospel is.

If you belong to Jesus, every day will have its cross, every day will have something you ought to do but you don't feel like doing. That is your cross. "He who follows me must take up his cross daily and follow me," {cf, Luke 9:23}. Every day has its bit of death in order that it might bring forth life. The end result is a life so glorious, so complete, so obviously what we were made for that I can hardly find the words to describe it. But the testimony of millions is that it's all true. Life comes only out of death.

You will find this thought everywhere in Scripture. It doesn't make any difference whether it's the Old Testament or the New Testament. But you will find this only in the Bible! No other book on earth will tell you that this is the way to life; only the Bible, only the words of Jesus. But his word is true, as he has demonstrated, and as the testimony of almost 2,000 years bear witness, he brings life through death. This is the choice that lies before us. If we choose to die with Him, then we shall live. "Truly, truly I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

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