

## The Stones Would Shout

In every victory there is of necessity the *vanquished*. We all want to win. No one wants the agonies of defeat. But it *seems*, anyway, that in this conflict which is human existence, there is a vast range of *choices* we each make which determine, in the end, whether or not we will triumph. God is in this, and is able to save us from our bad choices, but still it *seems* that this principle of willful choice at least *appears* to be true of individuals, families, communities, and even whole nations.

To the people lining the parade route that day, Jesus was offering an *alternative* to a disastrous path – a way to *victory* which was every bit open to them as was the path that would lead them, as a people, to utter defeat. Yet, mysteriously, this path to victory is leading him to a *cross*. There is a death somewhere along the path to life. How does *that* work? And where are you and I on that path?

The apostle Paul reflected much later on the triumph of Jesus Christ. He said in Ephesians 4, “When [Jesus] ascended on high he led captivity captive and gave gifts to his people.” (Eph 4:8). He pictures an ancient king who when he has vanquished his enemies *plunders* them and brings back that plundered wealth to his own land and lavishes it on his subjects. A victorious king was expected to give plunder as a gift to his people.

Have you ever thought of Jesus as a *plunderer*. He is. Not in the worldly sense. Nevertheless he has plundered Satan’s kingdom. In Ephesians 4 the “plunder,” of which Paul speaks is *people*. He plunders his enemy of its *most precious* asset— men and women long enslaved by tyranny, wealth and greed. He seizes for his own use all that allows something like a Roman Empire to continue to function. He *dis*-empowers what *empowers* bullies like Pontius Pilate, a Herod King of the Jews, or Caiaphas the High Priest.

We are the plunder from Satan’s kingdom taken captive by Jesus and given as a gift to the church. The “plunder” is a people redeemed by the blood of the cross. The kingdom exists in hearts and minds – but it’s something much more; for when Jesus’ opponents demand that he stop his followers from shouting praise in the streets, he says if *they* stop, even the *stones* will cry out, for *his* triumph extends even to the redemption of *Creation itself*.

He is Lord of Heaven and Earth. But they didn’t know that – *yet*. How could they? And how *will* they come to believe that? Why do we still praise this Jesus who died on a cross?

The ideal way to hear this Gospel story in Luke 19 is to take our place among the crowds, strain our necks and try and get a glimpse of this *Jesus*. What do *you* think *they* think is going on? If you could pretend you don’t know, and say to one of these palm-waving-praise shouting people what’s this all about? What would they say?

They would say, You see that man? That’s Jesus. He’s riding up to Jerusalem on a donkey. And you’ll never believe. . . .

What he just said.

In verse 28 it says, “After he had said *this*, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.” So what had he just *said*? Jesus was a prophet and prophets in the Jewish tradition always *said*, basically, two things: first, they announced God’s imminent judgment on the people who had broken covenant; and second, they always proclaimed the coming of a *new day* when God would act graciously towards his people. And Jesus had just done exactly this *in a parable*. It is the “parable of the pounds” And he tells it because --verse 11 – “they supposed that the kingdom of God was about to appear *immediately*. “

So why was this parable so appropriate to this particular circumstance? How does it shed light on the significance of riding bareback into Jerusalem? I don't think those people even knew. Because nothing with Jesus operates on just one level. But on a very practical level he must manage the *political expectations* of vast crowds of Jews awaiting a messiah. If he truly is the Anointed One, then they expect a profound change in the current political realities. If he is the King, it can no longer be business as usual within the *power structures* of Jerusalem. But what Jesus will do to change those realities is not what they expect. So in order to explain this he tells a parable. The parable is. . .

### **A veiled political commentary**

In his tale, a nobleman goes away to receive *royal power*, (obviously from an emperor) This man, however, in his bid for power, does not go *unopposed*. He is *followed* to the imperial capital by a group of angry citizens who *hate* him and don't *want* him to rule over their land. (14). Nevertheless he *is* successful and when he returns, he holds court with his slaves who have meanwhile been managing his money. And remember how the one slave was so *afraid* he had hidden his master's money, too terrified to take any chances in the market, *because he knew his master was "a harsh man."*

All of this is a thinly disguised version of actual political history in Judea. The unveiled version goes like this. In 4 B.C. Archelaus, son of Herod the Great, went away to Rome to petition Caesar to give *him* his father's kingdom – to renew the contract as puppet king of the Jews. But, as in the parable, there was likewise a *delegation* who followed Archelaus to Rome to protest. And they were *successful*, but only to the extent that Caesar gave Archelaus only *half* of Herod's former kingdom. So their victory turned bitter because Archelaus returned home to wreak vengeance on those who had rejected him. In fact Archelaus was so cruel Caesar finally exiled him to Gaul in 6 A.D.

(You might remember, from Matthew's Gospel how when Jesus was a boy in Egypt, his father Joseph has a dream telling him to return to their homeland. But Joseph doesn't return to *Judea* where he came from because "*Archelaus was reigning there in the place of his father Herod*" So Joseph was afraid to go there. (Matt 2:22) and the holy family then goes to live in Galilee.)

So the parable of the pounds is a thinly veiled commentary on this history. And in the parable, it says, when the nobleman returns he says, "these enemies of mine who *didn't want me to be king* over them – bring them here and *slaughter* them in my presence." (27)

And it is right after this parable with its sobering conclusion, that Jesus immediately gets on his donkey. What's he trying to get at? What's the implication? Just this: they expect the imminent coming of the kingdom of God.

### **He says, "Yes the kingdom of God will appear immediately just as you suppose, but the king will be rejected."**

Yes, the political realities in Judea are about to change profoundly. But in the parable Jesus is making a comparison between those a generation ago who had rejected Archelaus and suffered terrible consequences, and those people in the present day who will reject him and choose their own dreams. They will crucify the king who has come to them from God. And therefore, just as the angry nobleman returned to exact vengeance on those who rejected him, so too the God of Israel will come using the armies of Rome to crush rebel Jerusalem.

*And yet there is hope.* This is still a triumph march. For God is *Sovereign* and *even if* every one of these people cheering Jesus on today *turn on him and abandon him*, – *as they will – even so* he will triumph – if they fail to praise him, the *stones* will cry out. For the God of Israel *is able* to raise up a new people –as if from the stones – who *will* praise him. But the path to the triumph must first lead to a cross. For in this triumph. . .

### **Jesus is blazing a trail to be followed**

For those who will come after him, he must lay down some recognizable “markers” along the way. This whole event is going to get really weird! He is about to take on the leaders, infuriate them, get arrested, tried, bound, whipped, *crucified*. Jesus is going to *die*.

So how, then, are they going to be able to look back and be able to say, “Yes, this Jesus Christ did lead us on the path to God”? What would be the markers along the road? The Signs we should follow? Later, the *resurrected* Jesus would confront the two disciples he meets on the Emmaus road. He would say to them :

*"Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.*" (Luke 24:25-27)

On his path to the cross Jesus is carefully marking the trail by his actions. Scriptures fulfilled – like underlined verses in your Bible – so that when they but looked back, they would see that all the way to the cross . . .

### **He was laying claim to the throne**

In verse 29 we read: “When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, "Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here.”

*Right here* is a very clear marker on his road to the throne: He is about to enter Jerusalem, go into the Temple, and symbolically drive out the illegitimate priestly establishment that rules in that place. And those priests would want to know *on what authority*. The priests were the de facto rulers of the Temple during the time of Jesus. But the *scripture* clearly speaks of the Temple’s true ruler being the *king, the son of David*. Only the true king would have had any *right* to do what Jesus is about to do. And within that *biblically knowledgeable culture*, a man who would dare to ride a donkey over the Mount of Olives and into Jerusalem was obviously making a claim to King David’s throne. **See Zech 9:9**

The triumphal entry of Jesus was clearly *fulfilling the Scriptures*. He was coming to rule as king. And the people *knew* this. Jewish crowds at Passover were just *waiting for someone* to do *something* like this. This explains the seemingly spontaneous jubilation. They praise God for the arrival, at last, of their true king. Jesus laid this down as a marker. He was leaving nothing to chance that they would miss it. He is more hands-on about this than may first appear. He was intentionally . . .

### **Creating a Buzz**

He sends his disciples to get the donkey, he says “ If anyone asks you, "Why are you untying it?" just say this, "The Lord needs it." "

And sure enough, “as they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?"

They said, "The Lord needs it."

He's deliberately starting the rumor. And, we might say, "It went viral." It worked.  
35 Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it.  
As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road.

This story raises a question? The skeptic may well ask, isn't he creating a false hope. Isn't this just a whole lot of hype? Here are people in the grip of Roman oppression. People whose religious leaders and their puppet king had been co-opted by the powers evil. The man on the donkey is certain to be bruised and crushed and broken. He doesn't stand a chance. Why is he giving them hope? Why is he deliberately creating the rumor that he is the Davidic king? Even if he has no regard for his own life, think of how he is endangering them!

Yet despite all these very real concrete realities he defies the powers, and in doing so creates . . .

### **An alternative reality**

37 As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen . . .

God's presence in this creates this moment, not of *unreality*, not of irrationality and fantasy, and foolish escapism, but an *alternative reality* – a reality that must be "believed to be seen". It is a *faith* reality, but it is a *true* reality: God will rule the world through Jesus Christ – but what the joyful crowd would have still have to face is the reality of sticks and stones.

The words they are shouting come from Psalm 118:26. "***Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!***"

This was a pilgrim song sung by people going up to worship in the Temple but this psalm-verse occurs in Ps 118 just after the verse about . . .

### **The stone the builders reject**

Jesus is seeking to rescue a city bent on refusing him. The stone the builders rejected has become the head of the corner – there's a deep irony in the praise of the crowds; because the return of the triumphal king will mean judgement not blessing for Israel. This explains why Jesus *bursts into tears* when he finally draws near and catches his first glimpse of the city.

Their *God* has come to them, and yet, he says, they have failed to recognize "the time of their visitation. . ." (41-44)

Jesus' overall perspective was that God was bringing down the demonic political powers dominating the society. This would make a true renewal of individual and social life possible. God was now driving Satan from control and opening the way to a renewal for the people of Israel. He's plundering the kingdom of darkness . He would win this battle, and yet they would not recognize "the things that make for peace," because, he says, "they are hidden from their eyes."

We don't need the archaeologists to tell us that these stones of Jerusalem, city and Temple, still do cry out: demolished as the evidence that Jesus was indeed the king. The stone the builders rejected did become the head of the corner. The stone that closed the Tomb of Jesus still cries out: *he is risen!* He has ascended to the right hand of God the Father Almighty. The stones still cry Hosanna! God saves! But where are the people?

If you believe that Jesus rose from the dead, then here's what I think we are left with from this story in terms of it's contemporary significance. Let me put it this way:

## **God doesn't want praise from the stones.**

Let's not make the stones cry out. God wants praise from people. He is the God who plunders the darkest vaults of Satan's kingdom. He's the God who brings the most enslaved and broken captives out of the darkness and into the light of day.

So here's where we can come back now to Paul's perspective on Jesus' triumph in the Letter to the Ephesians. We might say "He is, today, still leading captivity captive." We can follow the one who rode in humble, gentle triumph, even though to do so means we too must take up a cross in our lives.

In response to this triumph of Jesus Christ, Paul says to the Ephesians in 5:8  
*"For once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light—for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true. Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them."*

And herein lies the way to triumph: it's to simply let the light do its work. People take on the characteristics of whatever sphere they live in. As just like those people who saw Jesus in the street that day, we too must *choose* to separate ourselves from the darkness. But, if we follow the example of Jesus, we find that this separation has not so much to do with an avoidance of evil people and places, as much as a *confrontation with them*. You could even say we become fellow-plunderers with Christ Jesus. Christians triumph as they *expose* the works of darkness. Those exposed to the light of God in Jesus Christ take on its qualities. There must be both an exposing and transforming aspect of our encounter with this one who rides so humbly and so full of love to embrace the pain.

To follow Christ is to allow the light in to reveal to us our true selves. It is to leave behind all that is darkness, and become like the light. The triumphal entry of Christ into the city teaches us to neither fear defilement nor avoid contact with non-Christians. We are called to an act of *defiance*. To defy any and all circumstances that would seek to define us by darkness. If we are to keep the stones quiet, we must let this praise rise from the very core of our being.