

## **Jesus and Civil Religion**

### **Luke 19:28-46**

There is a tremendous amount going on in these few verses, most of which we miss because we are not sufficiently familiar with the Old Testament background, and Jewish expectations in Jesus' time. So most days this week, we will look not only at the Lukan narrative, but also at the underlying Old Testament passages.

#### **Day 1: Luke 19:28-38 cf. Zechariah 14:3-21 The Mount of Olives**

Twice Luke locates Jesus at the Mount of Olives (19:29,37). Why is location so noteworthy?

Because of its Old Testament associations.

Zechariah prophesied to Judah in exile, promising a return to the homeland, but not to peace. Eventually, surrounding nations would attack Jerusalem again, and its people would suffer. But this time, God would intervene, and fight for Israel against the nations. On that day, the Lord will straddle the Mount of Olives, and lead his angels in battle against the pagan horde. "It will be a unique day... On that day living water will flow out from Jerusalem... The Lord will be king over the whole earth... The Lord will strike all the nations that fought against Jerusalem [with a plague]" (Zech 14:6-8,12).

So when Jesus comes preaching the reign of God, his audience thought of Zechariah's promise that the Lord would be king. As Jesus approached Jerusalem, they thought of Zechariah's promise that God would protect the capital from enemy attack. As Jesus stood on the Mount of Olives, they thought of Zechariah's portrait of the Lord, straddling the Mount, leading his angels into battle against the pagan army. Luke – and Jesus before him – intentionally ties into these associations: Jesus is the king whom Zechariah promised, come now to free his people from their captors, to rule over all the world, to lead his people in victory, peace, and prosperity.

"The King is coming!" the old worship song proposes. No. Luke's point is, "The King is now here!" Everything that Zechariah promised and that first-century Jews looked for has not yet come to pass, but the reign of God has begun; it began in Jesus. Luke invites us to worship Jesus as king over all the earth, even as we wait for his reign to work itself into every nook and cranny of our lives and our world.

#### **Day 2: Luke 19:28-30 cf. Zechariah 9:9-11 Riding on a colt**

Jesus typically walked wherever he wanted to go. Now, for some

reason, he sends his disciples to hunt down a young donkey for him to ride into Jerusalem. Why a colt? Why now?

Because of its Old Testament associations.

The king whom Zechariah prophesied would come to Judah, to lead the nation to victory over all enemies, this king would arrive on a colt: “See, your king comes to you, righteous and bringing salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey” (Zech 9:9-10).

So Jesus sends his disciples to track down a colt because it was every bit a symbol of his kingship as an eagle crest is the symbol of a U.S. president. Riding a colt into the city at festival time, he did not have to proclaim himself to be the long-promised king; he symbolically acted out his kingship in a way that everyone understood.

The reign of God has begun; it began in Jesus. Luke invites us to worship Jesus as king over all the earth, even as we wait for his reign to work itself into every nook and cranny of our lives and our world.

### **Day 3: Luke 19:28-33 “Go to the village ... you will find a colt”**

This piece of the narrative has no particular Old Testament precedent, but appears to be here for another reason. The key to its interpretation is the pattern of precise prediction – fulfillment: (1) go to the village ... they went ahead; (2) as you enter, you will find a colt tied there ... [they] found it just as he had told them; (3) untie it and bring it here ... as they were untying it; (4) if anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ ... its owners asked them, ‘Why are you untying the colt?’; (5) tell him, ‘The Lord needs it’ ... They replied, ‘The Lord needs it.’ Five detailed and precise predictions, each one fulfilled in the events that followed.

What is Luke’s point in recording this? Narrative generally states its point implicitly, rather than explicitly; still, the point here is clear enough. Luke is not implying that Jesus worked all this out behind the scenes and ahead of time; instead, he would have us infer that Jesus was prescient.

Why does this point matter? Luke is portraying Jesus as the king whom Zechariah predicted, about to initiate the reign of God over all the earth, from the city of Jerusalem. Yet the first-time reader will soon discover – as the experienced believer already knows – that things do not turn out well for Jesus in Jerusalem. His purported subjects do not acknowledge him, and his opponents assassinate him. Is he a failed king, a messianic pretender? No. The colt narrative demonstrates that Jesus knows down to the smallest details what is to come upon him. He is most certainly king, though expectations of what this king will accomplish may need drastic revision.

**Day 4: Luke 19:35-38 His subjects welcome their king**

The crowd rolls out their coats before Jesus and his donkey. They shout praise to God for all the miracles Jesus has done. They cry out, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’

Why these three particular reactions?

Because of the Old Testament associations.

As Jehu came to be anointed as king, his supporters lay down their cloaks like a red carpet (2 Kings 9:12-13). Jesus’ disciples do the same.

Each year, as the reigning king entered Jerusalem to celebrate his rule, the people would recite Psalm 118, celebrating the great things the Lord had done through their king (Ps 118:15-16). So Jesus’ disciples praise God for ‘all the miracles they had seen.’

As part of the ancient enthronement ritual, the subjects would greet their king, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” (Ps 118:26). So do Jesus’ disciples.

Jesus enters Jerusalem as king, coronated by his followers. The reign of God has begun; it began in Jesus. Luke invites us to enthrone Jesus over our lives, even as we wait for his public enthronement over all the earth.

**Day 5: Luke 19:41-44 The first dissonant note: Jerusalem**

Abruptly the Old Testament anticipations hit a wall. The Mount of Olives, riding on a colt, coats spread on the path, adoring subjects worshipping God while they enthrone Jesus as king: all of this fits Old Testament prediction. But not what comes next.

In Zechariah 9 and 14, the coming king frees his people from oppression, and conquers their enemies: “I will take away the chariots ... and the warhorses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations” (Zech 9:10); never again will Jerusalem be destroyed” (Zech 14:11).

Yet as Jesus enters Jerusalem, he grieves, and warns of a terrible, coming destruction: “Your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and [your] children... because you did not recognize the time of God’s coming to you” (Luke 19:44). God is not going to deliver his people, as Zechariah anticipated; instead, he is going to permit their destruction. Why? Because they did not welcome Jesus. This happened in AD 70, when the Romans crushed Jerusalem.

What lesson does this hold for our country? A vague religious sensibility – civil religion – pervades our culture. We sing, “God bless America” during baseball games ... our Treasury Department prints, “In

God we trust” on money ... we pledge allegiance to “one nation, under God.” But it is not sufficient for a nation to be vaguely religious. God destroyed his people, Israel, twice: the first time because they failed to follow God; they second time because they failed to follow Jesus. America cannot claim to be – and as Christians we cannot claim it to be – under special divine blessing, uniquely God’s people. Vague ‘civil religion’ counts for nothing with God. It affords us no more protection than it afforded ancient Israel; what counts is worshipping and following Jesus.

### **Day 6: Luke 19:45-46 The second dissonant note: the temple**

As noted earlier in the week, Psalm 118 served as a processional hymn for Israelite kings as they traveled to Jerusalem for coronation. So Jesus’ followers chant it as they accompany him to what they anticipate will be his coronation in Jerusalem. But, as with Zechariah, Jesus introduces a discordant note, breaking with its expectations of the coming king.

In Psalm 118, the king’s subjects celebrate: “With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns of the altar” (118:27). In keeping with this expectation, Jesus does indeed proceed up to the temple. But not to celebrate. Instead, he drives out those selling accoutrements for the sacrifices. His objection: what was meant to be ‘a house of prayer’ (Isa 56:7), has become a ‘den of thieves’ (Jer 7:11).

While ‘den of thieves’ may entail some protest against high-markups for currency exchange and sacrificial animals, likely Jesus was inflamed by two other complaints. For one, in the original reference, Jeremiah protested those who thought that worshipping in the temple would protect them from judgment for immoral private lives and unethical business practices. Jeremiah warned that temple worship will not compensate for immoral living or unethical business practices (Jer 7:9-11). Additionally, in Jesus’ time, the word here for ‘thieves’ often referenced insurgents or guerillas, using temple and Jewish religion to stir up hatred against the Roman occupiers (much as mosques in Iraq or Afghanistan sometimes serve today to stir up hatred against American occupying forces).

For us, this passage warns, no less today, that worshipping Jesus will not provide protection for those who live immorally or conduct business unethically. Additionally, in an election year, it warns against manipulating Christian faith for political ends, whether to justify violent insurrection, in Jesus’ time, or to secure votes, in ours.

Civil religion – the use of faith to unify the nation and to provide sacred authority to its government – counts for nothing with God. Religion that counts with God worships Jesus, and follows him, in public and in private.