

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 04/10/2022



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Palm Sunday

Revised Common Lectionary Year C

Sunday, April 10th

Luke 19:28-40

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Being an ass

Despite the lack of palms, Luke's account of Jesus' triumphant approach to Jerusalem gives us much to think about on this Palm Sunday. Despite knowing what was about to happen, Jesus boldly presses forward with His mission. Amid such major theological implications of Jesus' actions, there are also small details that provide insight on how Jesus organized His ministry. Perhaps the greatest point of reflection in this story is to identify how and where we fit into it.

Luke 19:28-40

²⁸ *And when he had said these things, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.*

The opening verse of the text indicates Jesus left Jericho where he had just had the encounter with Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector, followed by His telling of the Parable of the Ten Minas (19:1-27). The destination is clear - Jerusalem (approximately 17 miles away). This is the culmination of the Travel Narrative beginning in 9:51 (*He set his face to go to Jerusalem*).

²⁹ *When he drew near to Bethphage and Bethany, at the mount that is called Olivet, he sent two of the disciples, ³⁰ saying, "Go into the village in front of you, where on entering you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever yet sat. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹ If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' you shall say this: 'The Lord has need of it.'" ³² So those who were sent went away and found it just as he had told them. ³³ And as they were untying the colt, its owners said to them, "Why are you untying the colt?" ³⁴ And they said, "The Lord has need of it."*

Bethany was a village about two miles from Jerusalem and the location of John's account of Mary anointing Jesus' feet (John 12:1-8). The location of Bethphage, although nearby, is unknown for certain. It is considered in the Talmud as an outer limit of Jerusalem. Jesus sends two of His disciples into an unnamed village (*the village in front of you*) to obtain a colt. "*The Lord has need of it*" appears to be a pre-arranged password. In the same way, Jesus will dispatch two disciples (in the second case Peter and John) to make preparations for the Passover meal. In this case the prearranged signal is a man carrying a jar of water and the pre-arranged password is "*The Teacher says to you, Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?*" (Luke 22:8-11).

To clear up any confusion over what exactly the animal was, the word translated as colt is *pōlon*. This is the same word used in Matthew and Mark. *Pōlon* refers to a young ass. In John the word used is *onarion*. This is another

word for young ass which is rendered as young donkey. A donkey and ass are the same animal (*Equus africanus asinus*) and thus colt refers to a young donkey or ass. The word *pōlon* is used in the Septuagint in two key messianic passages: Genesis 49:10-11 LXX and Zechariah 9:9 LXX. Luke also tells us how no one has ever ridden the colt. The colt is thus unspoiled by previous use and appropriate for sacred purposes (cf. Numbers 19:2; 1 Samuel 6:7). The Messianic undertones here are very strong.

³⁵ *And they brought it to Jesus, and throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it.* ³⁶ *And as he rode along, they spread their cloaks on the road.* ³⁷ *As he was drawing near—already on the way down the Mount of Olives—the whole multitude of his disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen,* ³⁸ *saying, “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”*

In v.35 Luke does not say that Jesus mounted the colt. We read how Jesus' disciples take the initiative - they spread *their* cloaks on the colt as a saddle and *they set* Jesus onto the colt. It is also notable that Jesus did not object. They and/or others laid their cloaks as a carpet on the road as a triumphal carpet (cf. 2 Kings 9:13). Note that there is no mention of branches whereas the other three Gospels do (John specifically says they were palm branches).

The enthusiasm of the crowd is clear as Jesus travels down the Mount of Olives. Unlike Matthew and John, Luke does not cite the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9. Luke puts the enthusiasm down to *all the mighty works they had seen*. As Luke notes, the crowd here *is the whole multitude* of Jesus' disciples. They would have been Galilean disciples making their way up to Jerusalem for the Passover and very familiar with the *mighty works* Jesus had done. They had been waiting for Jesus to proclaim Himself as the long-awaited Messiah and now here He was riding into the capital in a way that proclaimed the prophecy. The crowd of disciples cry out the blessing from Psalm 118:26. All four Gospel writers tell us the crowd proclaimed this blessing - only in Luke and John do the crowd refer to Jesus as King. Luke alone includes *Peace in heaven*. Perhaps this is a link to the multitude of the heavenly host appearing to the shepherds at Jesus' birth proclaiming: "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!*" (Luke 2:14).

³⁹ *And some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples.”* ⁴⁰ *He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out.”*

The Pharisees now fulfill the Parable of the Ten Minas (Luke 19:14): "*But his citizens hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, 'We do not want this man to reign over us.'*" The Pharisees were perhaps fearful that such a crowd, particularly of unruly Galileans, would provoke a Roman response. The Pharisees may not have been able to control the crowd themselves and thus appeal to their Master to rebuke them. Instead of rebuking His disciples, Jesus rebukes the Pharisees. Jesus tells them that even if the disciples stopped expressing their praise *the very stones would cry out*. The stones would serve as witness against them (cf. Habakkuk 2:11) and all creation was made to worship He that is Lord over all creation.

Reflections

Among this familiar narrative that has huge theological implications, there is a glimpse of Jesus' approach to His ministry when it comes down to organization and attention to detail. Commentators argue the dispatching of two disciples to fetch the colt was either an example of foreknowledge or prearrangement. When the later similar example of preparing the Passover meal is considered, the reader is left with the impression that Jesus has put a lot of prior thought and organization into these unfolding events. Since everything in Scripture is there for a reason, we are shown that we must approach our own ministry in the same way - we should plan effectively and do things in good order.

In both these examples we also see the obedience of Jesus' disciples in following His commands. We don't know the identity of the two that were sent to fetch the colt. In modern equivalence, this is like being told to go into town where you will find a new car parked at the end of Main Street. The keys are in the ignition. Just bring it back here. If anyone tries to stop you just tell them, "The Lord has need of it!" Are we willing to trust Jesus in the same way and take him at His Word (not just some of His Words)?

The story of Jesus' approach to Jerusalem described by Luke challenges us to reflect on where we fit in:

(1) There are the Pharisees - representatives of the established religion. Over subsequent generations they distorted God's Word and placed human laws above God's Law. Now they are frantic to hold onto their worldly position and are fearful of Jesus, His disciples, the unpredictability of the crowds, and the Romans. In our time of great social change there are some versions of Christianity that are watering down the Gospel so it will fit into the culture in the mistaken belief that this will help to retain past glories or seek to achieve goals that are more political than spiritual. They are literally willing to throw out the baby [Jesus] with the bathwater. Perhaps the merits of this strategy are reflected in plummeting church attendance.

(2) There is the multitude of on-the-surface enthusiastic disciples. How deep is their commitment? How quickly will this enthusiasm evaporate? Where will these disciples be on Good Friday? Where are today's disciples after two years of COVID? As of the time of writing, the research suggests 25 percent of church members across the board have yet to return to in-person worship. Reasons cited for continued absence include inconvenience of attending worship and the development of new habits.

(3) That leaves the tied-up colt - like a clueless sinner in bondage. Jesus calls the colt and sends two of His disciples to free it. One minute the colt is in bondage with no clear purpose, the next minute the colt is transformed, being used by the Lord of all creation to accomplish His will on earth.

When it comes down to fitting in with the human-centric establishment, selling out the Gospel to please the culture, or trying to get Jesus to follow you on your terms, being an ass appears to be the better option.



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