

29. The triumphal entry

We often say that Jesus was rejected by his people, by the Jews. This is not completely true. Yes, he was delivered to the Roman authorities by the Jewish leaders. Yes, these leaders manipulated a Jewish crowd into demanding his crucifixion. And yes, the majority of Jews did not convert to Christianity. But it is not true that the Jews didn't want Jesus at all. They wanted him to be king, but not the sort of king that was really needed.

Jesus refused to conform to their expectations, because he had come to accomplish the mission that God the Father had given him. This is what will stand out in our study today:

Our text is taken from Matthew 21, Luke 19 and John 12:

“[Jesus] went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.” (Luke 19:28)

“Now when they drew near Jerusalem, and came to Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, ‘Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Loose them and bring them to Me. And if anyone says anything to you, you shall say, “The Lord has need of them,” and immediately he will send them.’ All this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying: ‘Tell the daughter of Zion, “Behold, your King is coming to you, lowly, and sitting on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey.”’ So the disciples went and did as Jesus commanded them. They brought the donkey and the colt, laid their clothes on them, and set Him on them. And a very great multitude spread their clothes on the road; others cut down branches from the trees and spread them on the road. Then the multitudes who went before and those who followed cried out, saying: ‘Hosanna to the Son of David! “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!” Hosanna in the highest!’” (Matthew 21:1-9)

“A great multitude that had come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, took branches of palm trees and went out to meet Him, and cried out: ‘Hosanna! “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! The King of Israel!’ ... His disciples did not

understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things were written about Him and that they had done these things to Him. Therefore the people, who were with Him when He called Lazarus out of his tomb and raised him from the dead, bore witness. For this reason the people also met Him, because they heard that He had done this sign. The Pharisees therefore said among themselves, ‘You see that you are accomplishing nothing. Look, the world has gone after Him!’” (John 12:12,13,16-19)

“And some of the Pharisees called to Him from the crowd, ‘Teacher, rebuke Your disciples.’ But He answered and said to them, ‘I tell you that if these should keep silent, the stones would immediately cry out.’ Now as He drew near, He saw the city and wept over it, saying, ‘If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side, and level you, and your children within you, to the ground; and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not know the time of your visitation.’” (Luke 19:39-44)

To understand this scene, we must concentrate on three things: what the crowd cried out, the ass's foal on which Jesus rode, and the tears that he shed.

HOSANNA!

In less than a week, the Jewish festival of Passover would take place. It is estimated that each year in that time period, more than two and a half million Jews would come to Jerusalem to participate in the feast. The pilgrims came from everywhere. A great crowd followed Jesus, who, despite the threats of death against him from the leaders of the Jews, was also going to Jerusalem. Another crowd came out of the city to meet him. The rumor had gone out among them that the one who had brought Lazarus back from the dead was approaching Jerusalem, and the multitudes went to welcome him with joy. The two crowds met like two immense waves of the sea, and all this mass of humanity cried out in praise of Jesus.

They said, “Hosanna to the son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in

the highest!” Hosanna is a Hebrew word which means, “Save now.” It corresponds to the cry of the British: “God save the king!” or “Long live the king!”

Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! These words come from Psalm 118, a song that the Jews sang at certain great celebrations. It was also the song of the conqueror. It was with this psalm, for example, that the crowd in Jerusalem had welcomed the general Simon Maccabee after his victory against the Syrian armies two centuries before Jesus’ time. Those who sang these words to acclaim Jesus undoubtedly received him as the Anointed of God, the Messiah, the Liberator, the One who was to come. And they certainly saw him as a champion, a conqueror. The people thought that in a short time, trumpets would sound to call the Jews to take up arms, with Jesus of Nazareth as their leader. The Jewish nation would defeat the Romans and would enjoy a victory against all their enemies.

They were far from rejecting Jesus at that moment. The leaders of the Jews had been close to despair, seeing their seriously threatened position. The people would gladly rid themselves of Roman collaborators to follow such a descendant of the great King David.

Some religious people today teach that Jesus was really going to be installed as king in Jerusalem and reign over a physical kingdom, but because the Jews did not believe in him and had him put to death, they claim, he was not able to do so. Instead he established the church and supposedly put off his reign on earth until later. It will be, according to these people, at the time of his second coming that the Jews will be converted en masse and that he will sit on his throne. Many passages in the Bible contradict this interpretation. The story of the triumphal entry of Jesus into the city of Jerusalem also shows that it is false. The multitudes who cried “Hosanna!” wanted, as a matter of fact, for Jesus to be head of a Jewish kingdom. It was Jesus who did not want this.

AN ASS’S FOAL; THE OFFSPRING OF A DONKEY

In such a situation, Jesus would not have been able to address these huge, overexcited crowds. He would not have been able to make them hear. Instead, he did something they would all be able to see. He arrived mounted on an ass. This act did two things. First, Jesus showed by this that he was the Messiah. It fulfilled what the prophet Zechariah had prophesied concerning the Messiah in Zechariah 9:9:

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and having salvation, lowly and riding on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey.” Jesus clearly identified himself with this prophecy. He claimed to be the Messiah, the king.

But secondly, by this act he spoke of himself as a particular kind of Messiah. The donkey was a respectable mount. The Bible mentions other important men who rode on donkeys. But a king mounts a horse when he goes to war or returns victoriously from battle. He mounts a donkey when he comes in peace. Jesus mounted on a donkey symbolized the fact that he is the prince of peace. He did not come to judge the guilty or make war against anyone. He came to Jerusalem with the goal of giving his own life in order to establish peace between a holy God and sinful men.

But no one understood the gesture of Jesus at that time. They were too carried away by the euphoria and excitement. This was the one for whom they’d waited for centuries. But they saw the Messiah of their dreams and not the Messiah that God had sent—the one they needed most. Most of them didn’t really want a Messiah who came to save them from sin.

THE TEARS OF JESUS

Jesus could have been flattered by the praises given to him. He could have considered this day as his hour of glory. But he understood very clearly the reality that was before him. As John 2:24,25 says of the Jews who had seen the miracles and had believed in him, “But Jesus did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all men, and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man.” He knew that the multitudes did not understand why he had come and did not want to understand.

A crowd in this same city would demand his blood less than a week later. Maybe some of those who cried “Hosanna” would be among those who would be crying, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” The inhabitants of this same city persecuted his apostles and all those who accepted their message of salvation in Christ. Seeing all of this in advance, Jesus could only weep for the city of Jerusalem. With tenderness and sorrow, he said to the city: “...[your enemies] will level you, and your children within you, to the ground; and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not know the time of your visitation” (Luke 19:44).

CONCLUSION

So Jesus was rejected by the Jews because he refused to conform to their ideas of what a Messiah would be. Jesus would not be a warrior or a blood-thirsty man—not for political purposes or for spiritual purposes. He would not make converts with a sword. God does not want us to serve Him because we are forced to, but because we love Him.

Jesus would not be a political king. Unlike the Jews, had no ambition to reign over geographic territories of human governments do. He wants to rule in men's hearts. He did not ask for the union of church and state or of the mosque and the civil government. Of course, if his teachings really permeate a society, there will be a very positive impact on its laws, its institutions and the behavior of both its citizens and its leaders, regardless of the form of government—whether it be a monarchy or a democracy. But the changes that will have eternal importance must come from inside, from the hearts of people who individually accept Jesus as their king, and not the changes that are voted into law by parliaments or decreed by heads of state. Jesus really is king, but his kingdom is not of this world.

Finally, Jesus would not be a king for the Jews alone. If the opportunity to become citizens of his royal kingdom was offered first to the Jews, it was to be offered afterward to all people. And in this kingdom, there would be neither Jew nor Greek, but all would be one in Jesus Christ.

If we want to receive Jesus as our king today, let us accept him on his own terms. May He free us, not from political or social oppression, but from the reign of sin in our lives. This will be true liberty.