

Alea Iacta Est

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Luke 19:28-40

After he had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. 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. If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it.'" So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" They said, "The Lord needs it." 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. 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, saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!" Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'" They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

“Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.

In ancient Rome, there was a river called the Rubicon, which marked the boundary between the Roman province of Cisalpine Gaul to the north and Italy proper to the south. Roman law forbade any general from crossing it with a standing army, a law designed to protect the republic from internal military threat. However, on January 10 in 49 BC, Julius Caesar did just that, crossing the Rubicon with one legion and igniting a civil war. According to the historian Suetonius, as he crossed the river to meet his destiny, he uttered the famous phrase *alea iacta est* ("the die is cast"). The phrase "crossing the Rubicon" is still a part of our language, used to refer to any person committing him or herself irrevocably to a dangerous course of action. It is another way of saying “passing the point of no return.” (Wikipedia)

In this morning’s text, Jesus enters the holy city of Jerusalem, and in doing so, in his own way, crosses the Rubicon. Jesus is entering the city to meet his destiny, to stand before the powers that be, and to face the consequences. As he enters the city, he is hailed as a hero in this story recounted in all four of the gospels.

It was a common custom in many lands in the ancient Near East to cover in some way the path of someone thought worthy of the highest honor. In Mark, Matthew, and Luke they are reported as laying their garments and cut branches on the street. John is the only Gospel to specifically mention palm branches, significant because the palm branch was a symbol of triumph and victory, as detailed in the Old and New Testaments:

Leviticus 23:40: On the first day you shall take the fruit of majestic trees, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook; and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God for seven days.

and

Revelation 7:9: After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands.

Because of the palm branches and the scene of the crowd honoring and cheering Jesus as he entered Jerusalem by waving palm fronds and carpeting his path with them, we call this day Palm Sunday.¹

Palm Sunday has to be the weirdest day of the Christian liturgical year. We find ourselves recreating it, sort of. We find ourselves cheering for Jesus; and it feels good to cheer for Jesus. He has been doing all of this healing and teaching and miracle-working, and all the time he has done this while getting hassled by the religious authorities. Jesus is a great guy! It is about time he got some respect! Lay down those garments! Wave those palm branches! Celebrate Jesus! Shout “hosanna,” which means “Save, I pray!”

Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!

But we have to ask why the crowd is so glad to see him.

Aren't those palm branches signs of victory, signs of victory for the Jewish people?

The people don't know why he is going into Jerusalem. They think he has come to fulfill the prophecy of Zechariah which reads:

Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the war-horses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken. He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the [Euphrates] River to the ends of the earth. (Zechariah 9:9-10)

They are cheering because they believe he has come to overthrow Rome and restore the kingdom of Israel.

Palm Sunday is so strange for Christians to celebrate because we know why Jesus is really going into Jerusalem. We have heard the story before. He is going into the city to

¹ Ibid.

be arrested, condemned, and crucified by those he came to save. He is going into Jerusalem to be abandoned, betrayed, and denied by those who knew him best and who promised to be with him no matter what.

Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!

We watch Jesus cross his Rubicon and we cheer him as he does it, but why? Is it because we feel too removed, too detached from what he did there? Is it because we feel too removed from what happened back then, a long time ago, in the ancient Near East? Is it because it is so easy to blame the Romans? Is it because it is so easy to blame the Jews?

Can we say that we believe that if Jesus came riding into to Washington, D.C., or to Richmond, or even Crozet, that things would be that much different? Earlier in Lent, we considered what it would mean for Jesus to come barreling into our sanctuary and kick over the tables as he did in the Temple. If he came into our town and began to question our power and our politics how would he be received? If he came into our town and began to attack our notions of who is out and who is in, how would he be received? If he came here and began to ask those hard questions and shake up our fundamental assumptions about ourselves and our God, how would we respond?

The fact is the Roman leaders had orders to keep the peace, and crucifixion was just a means to that end, and Jews lacked the legal authority to crucify anyone. Jesus did not go to the cross because of individuals or individual cultures. He instead went to the cross to confront our flawed assumptions of power and politics and prestige and who is out and who is in and what we believe about God and what we believe about ourselves.

Jesus was sent to the cross by human nature, our human nature. Jesus did not go to the cross simply to institute a new monarchy or to tinker with the wheels of government. Jesus crossed the Rubicon to change us. No wonder those who were so excited when they thought Jesus had come to start a revolution and change someone else. No wonder they stood and screamed “CRUCIFY HIM” to Pontius Pilate when they saw the kind of King Jesus turned out to be.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, he could have just blended in. He could have just been another observant Jew who had come to celebrate the Passover. He could have picked his battles. He could have behaved in such a way that he was a friend to everyone,

asked nothing of anyone, and then resumed his teaching/healing/feeding mission elsewhere.

But that is not who Jesus is. Even at the cost of his own life, he would obey God, go where he was sent, say what needed to be said, and do what needed to be done. *alea iacta est*.

This Holy Week we are about to enter teaches us that if we are honest with ourselves, we all feel this way. Yet, it is about acknowledging that this is not the way our God works. We are saved through suffering. We gain our lives only by losing them. We are a part of saving the world only by first renouncing it. We learn that the price of our sin is death and the cost of our salvation is our lives.

And we cannot do this for ourselves, and God knows it.

So his precious son, our great king, mounts a colt, and rides to the cross for us, faces our music, dies our death, and pays our price, doing that which we could never do for ourselves.

And that's good news. And that is why we wave the branches, why we line the roadway, why we shout hosanna. Thanks be to God.

GLORIA IN EXCELSIS DEO.