

The King's Visit
Luke 19:37-48

From passages like this it's easy to see how the Pharisees got their reputation as a bunch of killjoys. Although Luke focuses on the celebration of Jesus' disciples, our responsive readings from Mark and Matthew indicate that countless others were caught up in the rejoicing. John's gospel says it was a great multitude that were waving their palm branches and blessing Jesus as the One Who comes in the name of the Lord. In fact, he says the crowd was so large that the Pharisees were complaining that the whole world had gone after Jesus.

So, why didn't the Pharisees want to join in the celebration? Why instead in verse 39 did they want Jesus to rebuke His disciples, to tell all of them to calm down, to quit calling Him the King that comes in the name of the Lord? Quite simply because the Pharisees didn't believe that Jesus was, in fact, their king.

So, why couldn't they see what everyone else saw? Why did they reject all the evidence that had so many other people convinced that Jesus was in fact the long-awaited Messiah? It was hard to ignore His mighty miracles of healing, miracles greater than those done by any of the Old Testament prophets. Most spectacular of all was Jesus raising His friend Lazarus from the dead, a miracle that had taken place just before Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Surely that should have been enough to convince even the most jaded of skeptics.

And yet the Pharisees remained unmoved, even though some of Jesus' miracles had been done right before their very eyes. On one occasion, Jesus told a paralyzed man to get up and walk while some of the scribes looked on. Another time, Jesus healed a man whose hand was withered as many Pharisees were gathered in a Synagogue for their weekly worship service.

But that, you see, was precisely their problem. For according to their elaborate interpretations of the Old Testament Scriptures, when Jesus brought healing to a sick person, that amounted to work. And the Law of Moses clearly said that people shouldn't work on the Sabbath day. So, according to the rules they had made up, Jesus was a lawbreaker. But at the same time, they couldn't deny the incredible power He had displayed.

So, they were faced with a choice. If they went along with the crowd and recognized Jesus as their Messiah, they would have to admit that many of their interpretations of Scripture had been off-base. But if they wanted to hold on to their own opinions, if they wanted to keep on believing that Jesus was a sinful lawbreaker, then they had to come to the conclusion that He was a demon-possessed blasphemer who needed to be crucified. And so they chose their own understanding over Jesus, and plotted with the Romans to have Him killed.

Now, it's easy for us to condemn the Pharisees for their stubborn blindness. But isn't it just as hard for us to give up our own opinions and admit that Jesus is right, especially when what He says just doesn't make sense? Does it really make sense, for example, for us to lend to those from whom we expect nothing in return? Does it really make sense for us to love our enemies? Does it really make sense for us to take up our cross and lay down our lives for the benefit of others? And if we just ignore those parts of Jesus' teaching, aren't we treating Him like those skeptical Pharisees did? Aren't we also rejecting His kingship over us?

Of course there was another group of folks who weren't at all excited about King Jesus coming into His capital city, and we read about them in verses 45 and 46. In those days, there were lots of merchants who set up shop in the outer courts of the Temple, selling the sacrificial animals folks had to

offer as part of their worship. Others made a living changing the coins that people brought from all over the world into the local currency so they could make contributions toward the work of the priests and Levites.

Now, there was nothing wrong with providing these sorts of services, if the merchants and money-changers had been willing to keep a respectable distance from where people were trying to worship and pray. But by turning the courts of the Temple into a bazaar, these businessmen had in fact disrupted the very acts of devotion they claimed to be facilitating. So, it's no wonder that Jesus threw them out of the Temple. For King Jesus, worship and prayer are more important than anything else we can do in this world.

And again, it's as easy for us to dismiss the greed of these merchants and moneychangers as it was for us to condemn the blindness of the Pharisees. But let's take a step back. After all, how many of us really put the things of the Spirit first in our lives? How many of us consider reading Scripture and prayer to be more important to our daily routine than, say, eating or bathing? How many of us are willing to let the means of grace – Scripture, prayer, sacraments – take a back seat to things like our jobs or our social engagements? No matter how loudly we profess our loyalty to King Jesus, if we consistently put our material wants and needs ahead of worshipping and serving Him, aren't we acting like those merchants and moneychangers? Aren't we also rejecting His kingship over us?

Yes, we know we should recognize King Jesus by making Him the top priority in our lives. And we know we should bow before Him, submitting to His authority even over our most firmly held opinions and beliefs. We know that the Pharisees and moneychangers had it all wrong, and that the Palm Sunday crowd was right to hail Jesus as their king.

But no matter how many palm branches they strewed in His path, no matter how sincere their adoration may have been, when Jesus looked at them, verse 41 says that all He could do was weep. For He knew that, in their own way, they were just as wrong about Him as were the merchants and the Pharisees. In fact, in verse 44, He says that they were just as blind to the time of their visitation. For even though they hailed Jesus as their King, they were completely wrong about what kind of King He would be.

Of course, it wasn't completely their fault. Ever since their childhood, their parents had told them that God would send a ruler who would destroy all their enemies and restore the independence and power Israel had enjoyed back when David was king. And to be fair, there are lots of passages in the Old Testament that point to the Messiah rendering exactly that sort of justice.

So, when Jesus came riding into Jerusalem, His disciples and lots of other people in the crowd were expecting Him to do things like throwing the moneychangers out of the Temple. What confused them was that He stopped right there. He didn't shower down bread from Heaven on them like God had done in Moses' time. He didn't use His tremendous popularity, let alone His miraculous powers to incite a revolution against the Romans. On the contrary, by the end of the week, He had allowed Himself to be arrested by the Jewish leaders and handed over to Pilate.

No, it's no wonder that they all turned on Him on Good Friday. As Jesus stood in mute humiliation before their pagan enemies, He wasn't any sort of Messiah that they could understand. That's why they asked Pilate to release the revolutionary insurrectionist Barabbas to them instead – that was the sort of leader they wanted. And when Jesus refused to act like Barabbas, they had no more use for Him.

But it was their craving for independence, their desire to throw the Romans out of their land that would lead to the catastrophe that Jesus predicted in verses 43 and 44. For about 35 years later, in the fall of AD 66, they would get what they wanted. The Jews would rise up and expel the Romans from

Jerusalem. They would even manage to defeat the first Roman army that was sent from the province of Syria to put down the rebellion.

But that was the trouble with the Romans – they always kept on coming. Emperor Nero soon dispatched Vespasian with four legions to restore order. And Vespasian swept all before him, pushing the rebels back within the walls of Jerusalem by the time he himself was made emperor in AD 69.

He left his son Titus to finish the job, and he laid siege to Jerusalem in the spring of AD 70. By August, the Romans broke through the city walls, killed most of the people and burned and demolished all the walls and buildings, including the Temple itself. The Romans were nothing if not thorough, so the only part of the city that remains is the Wailing Wall, which was a retaining wall holding up the part of the mountain on which the Temple once sat. Above ground, as Jesus predicted, not one stone stands upon another.

And why did all that happen? Because, no matter what they may have said on Palm Sunday, the crowd was just as insistent on doing what made sense to them as the Pharisees were. They were just as focused on the things of this world as the moneychangers were. It was because the Jerusalem crowd tried to use force against the Romans to get the peace and the prosperity they craved that they and their city would be destroyed. And they rejected Jesus on Good Friday for the same reason – because He refused to meet their demands, they refused to go on believing He was their King.

So, what about us? How do we feel about Jesus when we don't get what we want? What do we do when unemployment or sickness or grief comes into our lives? Lots of people have turned away from Jesus when tragedy strikes them or their loved ones. They just don't see how a God Who would allow such suffering is worthy of their worship.

So, what's our response when Jesus doesn't answer our prayers the way we think He should? Do we doubt His power to help us? Do we question His love for us? Do we give ourselves over to bitterness or even despair? In our disappointments, do we turn away from Him the way the Pharisees, the merchants and the Jerusalem crowd did?

Yes, that's the key question for us on this Palm Sunday. The King has come to us, just as He did to the people of Jerusalem. He has laid claim to our allegiance by laying down His life for us. We may not understand everything He says. He may not give us everything we want. He may not change the outward circumstances of our lives at all. But He calls all of us to follow Him on His terms, no matter what happens. Will we trust Him enough to surrender our lives to Him?