The Rightful King

Preached on The Tenth Sunday after Trinity
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
August 8, 2021
Text: Luke 19: 41-46

Our passage from Luke this morning occurs as Jesus is about to enter Jerusalem to complete his mission. He has come from Jericho, where he was the guest of Zaccheus, the tax collector. He is riding the never-ridden foal of a donkey and making the descent from the Mount of Olives into Jerusalem. It is quite a sight. Many of his followers and supporters are throwing down their cloaks before him, rejoicing and praising him with words taken from Psalm 118. "Blessed is the King who comes in the Name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"

All four gospels record this event and it has come to be called the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. But there is a tension between the way the crowds are seeing Jesus and his own attitude, which indicates that "triumphant" may not be the right word. On the one hand, the enthusiasm of the crowds is contagious. The King is coming into the Holy City! Hosanna! On the other hand, we see Jesus filled with pain. He accedes to the celebration—indeed, he initiates it. But he is somehow detached. Instead of lifting his hands in victory as might a politician or conquering general, he is subdued. And when Jerusalem comes into sight he begins to weep bitterly—not for himself, but for the city and its inhabitants. He already knows the fate of this great city.

But knowing this, as well as what awaits Him, Jesus enters Jerusalem in a kingly manner. Up until now Jesus has been very guarded about his identity as Messiah (see, for example, Mark 8:30). Rather than using the term Christ (Greek for "anointed one") or Messiah (the Hebrew word for the same), he has identified himself previously as Son of Man. If Jesus had acknowledged publicly that he was the Messiah, the political implications would be such that he could not complete his intended ministry of teaching, healing, and proclaiming the Kingdom. But now that ministry is coming to an end. All that remains is to complete Father's will and walk that terrible road to Calvary. Jesus is determined to fulfill messianic prophecy.

His claim as King must now be clear. Indeed, this claim of Messiahship, this open acknowledgement of Kingship, seems to precipitate his death. It was certainly on the lips of everyone in Jerusalem that week (Luke 22:67; 23:3, 35, 38, 42; 24:26, 46). Jesus was not heading for crucifixion because he was preaching a message of personal salvation. A multitude of mystery cults were already doing that. Rather, he was killed for his claim to Kingship and the threat that was to the power structure.

Now it would behoove us to spend some time looking at this, because it challenges our preferred view of what has come to be known as "religion." For we are the recipients

of certain taken-for-granted binaries bequeathed to us by the Enlightenment. Among these are Church and State, Religion and Politics, Faith and Reason, Private and Public, Values and Facts. And we read these binaries back into the New Testament documents. But as N.T. Wright points out, for

> *anyone who knows the world of the first century—or for that matter any century until the eighteenth, and any country outside so-called Western civilization…the implicit split between 'religion' and 'politics' is a rank anachronism, and we read it into the NT only if we wish not to hear anything the NT is saying, not only about what we call "the state" but about a great many other things as well. No first-century Jew (and no twenty-[first] century Arab, or Pole, or Sri Lankan) could imagine that the worship of their god and the organization of human society were matters that related only at a tangent. ("The New Testament and the 'State,'" Themelios 16, no. 1 (Oct./Nov. 1990): 11)*

Israel's theology was inescapably historical and political. It was not a theology for cloistered academics; nor was it a study of what one needs to believe in order to be "saved." The Pharisees and others vying for control were not merely pushing a "religious" agenda, in our rather anemic understanding of that word. Rather, their different understandings of what being a faithful Jew was *included* the political, social, and economic. Their hope was not for disembodied bliss after death, but for the arrival of the kingdom of Israel's God.

But a fair objection can be made here. "Wasn't the Jews' desire for a *political* Messiah where they got things wrong, as many of us have been taught? Didn't Jesus say that my kingdom is not of this world? (John 18: 36) Why should we see Christianity as a continuing of this Jewish fixation on the social and political when Jesus seemed to stress a message of personal salvation and inner peace? After all, our passage from Luke certainly seems to support this view of an apolitical gospel, given the disaster that is coming for Israel as they attempt to throw off the yoke of the Romans."

This objection seems quite plausible given our modern sensibilities; but it only seems that way if we ignore much of Jesus's ministry. We tend to see both he and John the Baptist as 1st Century revivalist preachers concerned only with getting individuals "right with God." But if delivering this sort of privatized message was Jesus's aim, he certainly went about it in a strange way. For the proclamation and invitation of Jesus looked uncommonly like the founding of a political movement. When large crowds followed Jesus up a hillside or to the seashore, they did not leave their homes and jobs for the day in order to be told about pie in the sky, or to be instructed in how to be nice to each other. They went because they sensed that Jesus was inaugurating the new day for which they had longed. When Jesus called some followers up into the hills, and arranged them into a group of twelve, this is not reminiscent of an apolitical religious club, but rather brings to mind those men who went off into the wilderness to prepare for God's action in restoring Israel. When Jesus took the twelve up north to Caesarea Philippi, the source of the

(politically symbolic) Jordan, elicited from them the acknowledgment that he was Messiah, and told them that they were going to march on Jerusalem, they heard what we would call a political message. He denounced rulers, real and self-appointed. He spoke of good news for the poor. He led large groups of people off into the wilderness, a sure sign of revolutionary intent. He announced the imminent destruction of the Jerusalem temple. At the start of a festival celebrating Israel's liberation, he organized around himself what could only have looked like a royal procession. Are we to see all of this as some giant symbolic presentation of what is finally only about my "personal" spiritual life?

And then there is his attack on those defiling the Temple recorded in verses 45 and 46. The Temple was the center of Jewish life at this time. It bore great social, spiritual, political, economic, and cultural importance. It would be as if we bundled together all of our iconic institutions: the White House, Capitol Hill, the National Cathedral, Wall Street, and Hollywood. The Jews at the time considered Jerusalem the center of the world, the hill Yahweh would defend against all attackers. At the center of Jerusalem was the Temple. To this Temple's courts all the world would someday stream, bearing offerings and worshipping the earth's one true God—Israel's Lord. So if Jesus is merely selling a message of personal peace and comfort, why do something so powerfully public as his cleansing of the Temple in verses 45 and 46? Why act in such a provocative and political manner, deliberately and dramatically acting out a parable of the Temple's destruction, thus drawing the anger of the authorities?

We often don't really probe these questions, because we have grown accustomed to seeing Jesus as ahistorical and apolitical. His life and ministry in ancient Israel, his inheriting of her story, are seen as mere background to the "timeless truths" of the Gospel. What we need to know about his mission and self-understanding can be distilled into a short tract, handed out on a street corner. We therefore tend to downplay the early Church's understanding of Jesus as well as his conscious recapitulation of Israel's story and destiny.

But this is to ignore so much of the New Testament! As was mentioned above, Jesus chooses 12 disciples, one for each of the ancient tribes of Israel. Like Israel, he is called out of Egypt (Mt. 2: 15). Like Israel, he wanders in the wilderness, faces temptation, and is fed by God. Like Israel, Jesus cares for the poor, the orphaned, and the stranger. He enacts Israel as it should be through his perfect obedience to the Father. Furthermore, he take's Israel's destiny upon himself; indeed, he *becomes* Israel. He will take on her suffering, her ruin, her destruction, and the devastation of the temple. He will be the point where her exile reaches its climax, as the pagan authorities execute Israel's rightful King. He will take on Israel's curse and exhaust it by condemning sin in his own body. Only so can the kingdom become on earth as it is in heaven. From this perspective, to say that Jesus' death itself was a political act doesn't divorce it from its theological implications. On the cross, politics and religion, as well as love and justice and a host of other abstractions, meet and merge. Only from the perspective of the cross can any view of politics, and hence of the "state," claim to be Christian.

It must be within the context of Israel's story that Jesus's life, death, and resurrection assumes its significance. For this was not just any man who died, but a man who took onto himself Israel's story. And within Israel's story, resurrection had long functioned as a symbol for the reconstitution of Israel, the return from exile, and the crowning redemption. Her hopes and claims were finally vindicated by Jesus's resurrection. Now from her and Jesus flow God's blessings on all the world.

The early Christians saw themselves as continuing Israel's story under new circumstances. The Church, as the New Israel, was in covenant with the risen Lord. She, under Jesus's headship, was the new Temple, the sanctuary of the living God. She was nothing less than the first fruits of a new humanity, reborn in Christ. Thus She was seen as a 'third race," neither Jew nor Gentile, but a new and holy nation. Once again, we arrive at a theological conclusion that is unavoidably cultural and political.

Christian faith, far from being a matter solely between the individual and God, amounts to being grafted into a new people. Gentiles, through baptism, are incorporated into the body of God's particular, historical people. Baptism is initiation into a new culture called *Church*, a political and social entity by which all other human endeavors—whether social, political, intellectual, or cultural—are evaluated. The Church should be, just as Israel was charged to be, "a light unto the nations." May the modern Western Church begin to take that seriously.

In the Name…