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Journey's End (Luke 19: 29-40)

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This Lent we have been journeying with Jesus to Jerusalem. Tonight we reach journey's end. Like many arrivals, it seems to contain a kind of ambivalence – a curious mixture of climax and anti-climax, of celebration and deflation.

Two and a half years ago, Neil and I had this kind of experience as we walked into Santiago de Compostela in northern Spain. We'd been on pilgrimage for 38 days, we'd covered 800 km on foot, and finally we were arriving. We made our way through the outskirts of the city, over flyovers and through underpasses, trudging along hard pavements by busy roads – nothing too medieval or romantic about the city's edge! We were elated, we were going to finish, our destination finally in reach. But no one seemed to notice this much longed for arrival unfolding in their midst. There was no celestial light, no singing of angels – just cars flashing past, a city going about its business, indifferent passers by.

We came closer to the centre of town, and towards what seemed a large, extended family who were gathered on the pavement. They stood to one side, looked at us and began to clap and cheer us in – shouting 'buon Camino', 'good pilgrimage'. We were moved to tears, we'd been noticed, our efforts acknowledged, acclaimed. But then we moved on and the cheering stopped. For the rest of our trudging in, no one seemed to care what we were in the process of accomplishing. And when we arrived at the Cathedral itself (which was covered in scaffolding) and tried to enter in joyful triumph, we were told we weren't allowed. No backpacks in the church, you see – we'd have to find somewhere to leave them, before we could go in. Talk about deflation!

There's something of this experience of mixed reception in the story of Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem. There are those who celebrate his coming. His disciples rise to the occasion by throwing their cloaks on the colt, and setting him on it; the people he passes by throw their cloaks on the ground – a gesture associated with the acclamation of a king. As he approaches 'the path down from the Mount of Olives', the whole multitude of disciples – apparently the number of those travelling with him has swelled along the way – begin to praise God for what they have seen in and through him, and acclaim him in the words of Psalm 118: 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord'. Notably, this psalm continues: 'The Lord is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar. You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you'.

The enthusiasm, however, is not universal. Predictably, the Pharisees are on hand to put a dampener on things: 'Teacher, order your disciples to stop'; quell this unseemly and inappropriate jubilation. And the city itself is indifferent if not alien. When Jesus sees Jerusalem, he knows it will not truly receive him. He weeps over it, and its failure to recognize 'the time of your visitation from God'. And when he comes finally to the Temple, he finds it (in Luke's words) 'a den of robbers'. He has come to the end of his long journey to Jerusalem but the holy city is faction ridden, corrupt and unwelcoming. A mixed reception, then – celebration and deflation.

And it seems that the ambivalence surrounding Jesus' arrival goes even deeper than the quality of his reception. It's almost as though he generates ambiguity in the very way he choreographs his entry. On the one hand, he seems deliberately to evoke Messianic associations, to make a Messianic claim. He instructs two of his disciples to go ahead to fetch a colt, which he says they'll find tethered in the next village. And this – as all the commentators faithfully point out – enacts the words of the prophet Zechariah writing in the 5th or 6th century BCE: 'Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O

daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey' (Zech. 9:9).

At the same time, this entry on a donkey is pointedly inglorious and almost absurd. In the Roman empire, successful generals (including the emperor) participated in what were called 'triumphs' – processions through the streets of Rome, celebrating military victory and Rome's imperial power. Triumphal processions gathered outside the city gates and then funneled through the 'triumphal arch' into the streets, the victorious general riding in a four-horse chariot, with the spoils of war and newly captured slaves paraded ahead of him. In this cultural context, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey, looks almost like a parody – a conspicuously 'anti-triumph', enacting a radically different kind of kingly power. His is leadership characterized not by domination and enslavement, but by humility – even humiliation. A king, then. But some king.

So this strangely ambiguous little procession, at once triumph and humiliation, makes clear that whether Jesus is received with cheering and acclamation, or with suspicion and hostility, there's no one who really gets what this journey has been about. At journey's end, Jesus is a lonely figure. His version of kingship is not the one his supporters hope for or expect; while his humiliation proves to his opponents that he's a fraud, misguided at best and blasphemous at worst.

So what do we think this journey is about? Just before it began and again just before he arrives in Jerusalem Jesus has told his disciples, 'the Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands'. But, Luke says, 'they did not understand this saying; its meaning was concealed from them, so that they could not perceive it. And they were afraid to ask him about this saying' (Luke 9: 44-45).

American scholar, Jacob Needleman has said that, ‘the words of the Gospel ... are addressed to human beings who “do not yet exist”’.¹ The gospels persistently depict the incapacity of his disciples to grasp what Jesus means, or to comprehend the meaning of what he does. They’re not there yet – their very capacity to receive the fullness of God’s Word has to be created. We live on the other side of Jesus’ death and resurrection ... but they were still journeying towards it. How could they have imagined, back then, that by *undergoing* death and humiliation, it might be possible, in the power of God’s Spirit, to *break* through into a new kind of life? Jesus is in the process of accomplishing this breakthrough. *And* he’s in the process of creating in them the capacity to follow him there.

Let me put this another way. Jesus is obeying God’s call to go into the heart of the world’s darkness, to bring love and forgiveness where there is only violence, rejection, despair. As he goes this way, walking steadfastly, in faith, towards this darkness, he creates a way for us. He creates trust in us that the light, the life of God cannot be extinguished. When this trust comes alive in us, then – like Jesus – we begin to dwell on the other side of death. We no longer have to be afraid. The violence of this world has no ultimate power to determine who we are or how we will respond. We are set free – free to tell the truth, free to be with each other, free to receive the gift of our lives and to know ourselves accepted, beloved.

That’s what this journey’s about ... and while we know there is great suffering yet to come, this day, as we arrive with Jesus in Jerusalem, the love that has made this journey for our sake, the love that is opening the way for us, rightly calls forth our praise and jubilation.

¹ Cited by Rowan Williams, *Address to the Synod of Bishops on The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith*, s.9 (accessed <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2645/archbishops-address-to-the-synod-of-bishops-in-rome#sthash.aORICeZy.dpuf>, 17 March 2016).