

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Conquered by Mercy

Luke 19:28-40

A teacher in junior church tells about a Sunday morning when the children were learning a song with the line, "He has conquered every foe." The teacher saw a number of puzzled expressions, so explained that a foe is an enemy. He then added, "The name of our foe begins with the letter D." He was of course referring to the Devil, but got some immediate insight into one family's politics when their child replied, "Oh, you mean the Democrats!"

We live in a time when the name and mission of Jesus are invoked against all sorts of enemies, including political ones. What was on the lips of that child is now, in some respects, all over television screens, podcasts, and social media sites. Jesus gets called upon as a weapon to help defeat those who oppose one's particular ideology or policies. If Jesus is on your side, then victory must be assured. It's just a matter of time before your opponents will go down in defeat.

As Jesus got closer to Jerusalem and the crowd's enthusiasm grew, there were many who felt exactly that way. Here was the one sent to conquer those who opposed God's kingdom. When Jesus takes office, we'll finally get the kind of government that the Lord promised. The Romans, their governor, and all their soldiers will be gone. No more oppression and violence and injustice. God's anointed one will draw his sword and strike down our enemies. We'll finally have peace and prosperity.

In today's text, the victory procession is already underway. What had been a small band of disciples has become a vocal multitude. Some are applauding. Some are chanting, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord" (v. 38). Some are singing the song they learned in junior synagogue, "He has conquered every foe." And of course, about everybody has their phone in the air, filming Jesus' arrival. This moment has to be captured for posting on social media and for future generations to see.

But as soon as the video shows up online, some of the religious leaders spot it and arrive on the scene, determined to dampen the enthusiasm and halt this procession. Remember that it's Passover. Jerusalem's population has swelled with religious pilgrims, which to the Romans means a heightened risk of disorder. This is why the Roman governor and extra soldiers are normally in the holy city during this time. If the disturbance and disruption reach a certain level, the Romans will respond swiftly and decisively. The last thing the Jewish people need is a riled up crowd of disciples publicly declaring that a new king is here to begin the revolt. So some of the religious leaders step in to shut down this political parade. They tell Jesus to silence his followers.

But Jesus tells them that would be futile. If he silences the multitude, then the rocks will just pick up the song and continue. Even the created order knows that what's happening is the work and will of God. It can't be stopped. The Lord, in his divine power, is on the move, claiming authority over what is rightfully his.

Strangely, though, this display of power doesn't look very powerful. The object of the crowd's praise is a sad looking figure, riding on a borrowed donkey, with someone's coat serving as his saddle. We were prepared to expect more, based on the story that comes

right before today's text. Jesus tells a parable about a nobleman who went on a journey to be appointed king. But the people of this land hated him and rejected his rule. Despite their opposition he was granted sovereignty over them. He proceeded to reward those who served him faithfully and to destroy his enemies. This was the kind of "kingly" behavior that people in Jesus' time had grown accustomed to. Corrupt, greedy, violent, and vengeful rulers who put their might on public display.

Yet Jesus looks so unroyal. He's not like the king in Jesus' parable. He's not like the Roman officers who could have taught him what a triumphal entry really looks like. As author Philip Yancey describes it, back in Rome,

The conquering general sits in a chariot of gold, with stallions straining at the reins and wheel spikes flashing in the sunlight. Behind him, officers in polished armor display the banners captured from vanquished armies. At the rear comes a ragtag procession of slaves and prisoners in chains, living proof of what happens to those who defy Rome.¹

But Jesus has no such captives. All he has are those whose hearts and minds have been conquered by the good news of a kingdom whose value system contradicts the values of this present world's kingdoms.

True, the transformation of Jesus' followers is far from complete. At this point, as the parade moves forward, they're praising him "for all the miracles they had seen" (v. 37). The Greek term in this verse can also mean "mighty works" or "deeds of power." And there had certainly been plenty of these during the disciples' journey with Jesus, especially in his public ministry. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus arrives on the scene in the spirit and power of Elijah (1:17). Jesus is filled with the Spirit's power (4:14). Through this power, he casts out evil spirits and heals the sick (4:36). Sometimes this is characterized as a power that went out from him when people touched him (6:19; 8:46). Jesus even transferred to the Twelve some of this power and authority (9:1). This might and authority that animated Jesus was essentially the power to make things right in a lost and sinful world. To reconcile sinners to God. To restore broken bodies and disturbed minds to physical and emotional wholeness. To restore marginalized and excluded people to community. To bring peace where there was turmoil and violence. To bring life where there was death. The disciples, and so many others, had witnessed these deeds of power. These are the kinds of things that a true "king" would accomplish.

J. R. R. Tolkien wrote a trilogy of books called *The Lord of the Rings*. In the third book, *The Return of the King*, the hero, Aragon, who is the rightful claimant to the throne of Gondor, returns to the city of Minas Tirith. Though he's victorious in battle against the dark lord Sauron, Aragon isn't yet able to claim the throne. So he enters the city in disguise in order to go to the Houses of Healing. That's where he seeks to heal his friends who were struck in battle. As he performs the healing, one of the attendants repeats an ancient verse: "The hands of the king are the hands of a healer, and so shall the rightful king be known."

If the authority to heal was one of the marks of Israel's anticipated king, then Jesus had certainly authenticated himself. His followers had witnessed it and participated in it. And as Jesus approaches the capital, they're still praising him for it. But we know that there's more to come in Jesus' mission of redemption, reconciliation, and restoration. Things are about to take a turn for the worse. And the way that Jesus arrives in Jerusalem anticipates it. We can already see that this ruler is going to exercise dominion in ways that overturn popular understandings of kingship. There will be healing on a scale much greater than what Jesus has accomplished so far. But this wholeness will come through his own suffering and death.

Already, in the verses right after today's text, we get a sense of the rejection that Jesus will experience during the last week of his life. From atop the Mount of Olives, Jesus glimpses

Jerusalem, and starts weeping. There's a Catholic chapel on the hillside where Jesus is believed to have stopped the donkey and cried. The chapel is formed in the shape of a teardrop. It's Latin name means, "the Lord weeps."²

A crying king. That's not something you see very often. But these royal tears flow from a heart of love and mercy. The heart of God. The God whose reign is resisted and rejected. The God whose anointed one gets nailed to a cross. As pastor Andrew Wilson has pointed out, God's way defeating sin and death overturns the present world's methods of conquest. Wilson says,

Rome, the most powerful military force the world has yet seen, gathers a battalion of soldiers to inspect Israel's king. They are armed; he is stripped. They come with swords and spears; he comes in nothing but the name of the Lord God. They carry the most advanced weapons available. He is carrying the ordinary carpenter's tools of his upbringing: nails, hammers, and planks of wood.³

As Jesus approaches Jerusalem, some are shouting "Hallelujah! Hallelujah!" But it won't be long until others are shouting "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Through it all, Jesus goes on. That's the message captured in the African American spiritual "Ride On, King Jesus." This song captured the aspiration of the hearts of enslaved people who believed they had a king who was powerful enough that no one could "hinder" him. And because Jesus couldn't be hindered, they had hope.

This song became the source of later variations. One of them is titled, "Ride On, Jesus, Ride On." It opens this way: "Ride on, Jesus, ride. / Ride on, Jesus, ride. / Ride on, Jesus, conquering king, / Ride on, Jesus ride." Ride on, Jesus, conquering king. Conquering is part of what kings do. But Jesus' tools of triumph are different. He doesn't advance the reign of God with planes, ships, tanks, artillery, and rifles. Instead, Jesus wields the weapon of mercy, and his battle cry is "Repent!" He accomplishes God's mission not by dominating but by dying.

The hymn I just mentioned goes on to say, "Ride again in the hearts of us, / Ride on, Jesus, ride." Our own hearts. Isn't that where some of the most intense fighting takes place in the advance of God's dominion? Isn't that where some of the fiercest combat happens? Our own hearts. That's the territory where the ultimate power, the power of God's love, must rule.

Yet, as Jesus knew when he wept on the Mount of Olives, the reign of God in our lives can be resisted and rejected. As author Frederick Buechner has observed, "Of all powers, love is the most powerful and the most powerless. It is the most powerful because it alone can conquer that final and most impregnable stronghold which is the human heart. It is the most powerless because it can do nothing except by consent."⁴

A Christian is a person whose heart has been conquered by the mercy of God in Christ, and whose life extends that mercy into the world. As you make the journey from this Sunday toward the resurrection joy of next Sunday, remember that Jesus rides on. And going with him through this week will mean that you stay on the path of the cross, where the mercy of God is revealed.

¹ Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 190.

² Cited in Dock Hollingsworth, "Dominus Flevit." Day1. <https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/6239d4b16615fb6f3300009e/dock-hollingsworth-dominus-flevit> (April 7, 2022).

³ Andrew Wilson, "Bringing a Tent Peg to a Sword Fight." Christianity Today. April 22, 2019. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/may/bringing-tent-peg-to-sword-fight.html> (April 7, 2022).

⁴ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*. Quoted in *Marriage Partnership* (Vol. 5, No. 5).