

*April 13, 2014 (Palm Sunday) Worship Service
First Presbyterian Church (EPC), Bentleyville, Pa.*

Luke 19:28-44

“The Tears of the King”

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It’s entirely possible to have all the *facts* about a situation right, and still completely misinterpret them. Like a detective who finds a single, bloody glove at a murder scene, its only marking a tag that says, “made in Guatemala,” and puts out an all-points bulletin for a one-armed Guatemalan. Or the man who reads that most accidents happen at home, and wonders why more people don’t just move. Or my own kids, who once they were old enough to read the sauce packets at the Chinese restaurant, got into a drawn out debate over whether duck sauce is made *from ducks*, or *by ducks*.

Or, for that matter, like this crowd that greeted Jesus as he entered Jerusalem. On the one hand, this was really the high point of Jesus’ public ministry. For three years he had been preaching to... mixed responses. His no-nonsense, straightforward style, his obvious love for children and for the poor and outcast, his unusual respect for women, his teaching – and maybe most important of all, his reputation as a miracle-worker – drew vast crowds, who hung on his every word, skipping meals and sleeping out in the fields just to be near him.

And yet some of the things he said, about God, about sin and repentance, about himself – people just couldn’t accept it. When Jesus stood up in the synagogue in Nazareth at the very beginning of his ministry, read from Isaiah about the Messiah, and announced, “today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21) the crowd gasped and asked, “wait a minute, isn’t this Joseph’s son?” as if to say, “the kid down the road *cannot* be the Messiah.”

Later, in Capernaum, he declared, “I am the bread of life,” and warned that “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you,” and the crowd was so disgusted by the idea that almost all of them left and went home. (John 6:48, 53) When Jesus taught about marriage and divorce, even his disciples were horrified, and scoffed that if that were the case, it would be better not to marry at all. (Matthew 19:10) When some Pharisees asked if Jesus thought he was greater than Abraham, the father of Israel, Jesus’ reply – “truly I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM” – made them so mad that they tried to murder him on the spot. (John 8:58-59)

Even Jesus’ closest followers were slow to figure out who he was. When Peter finally blurted out, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!” Jesus said that it was not flesh and blood that had revealed this to Peter, but “my Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 16:16-17)

Here, *finally*, on Palm Sunday, as Jesus entered Jerusalem in triumph, everyone seemed to *get it*. They greeted him with cries of “Hosanna to the Son of David!” and “Blessed is the King, who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in

the highest!” For the first, and only, time during Jesus’ earthly ministry, the adulation of the people harmonized with the praise of heaven. Israel recognized her King, her Messiah, her Savior.

And yet... despite that insight, they somehow completely misunderstood what *kind* of King Jesus is, and how he would come into his Kingdom.

This misunderstanding is not something that happened *after* Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. It’s not as though they changed their minds on Monday or Tuesday. It’s abundantly clear what they were expecting, from the greeting they gave him.

Look at the palm branches – from the Gospels alone, you’d think that waving palm branches was a fairly common way to greet a King. But it isn’t – in fact, *nowhere else* in canonical Scripture is *anyone* greeted with palm branches. But there was a parallel in fairly recent Jewish history: when Judas Maccabeus and his army entered Jerusalem after having defeated the armies of the Greek Seleucid Empire. (cf. 2 Maccabees 10:7) It doesn’t take a genius to see the significance of those palms: a hundred and fifty years earlier, a Jewish hero had risen up and defeated the pagan empire that held Israel under her heel; now a new hero was here, and the Jews expected – or at least were hoping – for history to repeat itself.

Even the donkey was misunderstood. It was a fulfillment of a prophecy spoken by Zechariah (9:9) that the Messiah would arrive in humble fashion, seated on a donkey colt. Zechariah went on to say that the Messiah would speak peace to nations, the prophet said, and set Israel free by the blood of the Lord’s covenant.

The folks lining the streets on Palm Sunday knew that prophecy. And they *thought* they knew how it was going to be fulfilled – or at least, how they wanted it to be fulfilled. They were sure that the blood of the covenant that Zechariah spoke of was Gentile blood – the blood of the Roman occupiers, which would be spilled in the streets like the blood of the Egyptians had been 1,500 years before. As Jesus passed, they shouted out “hosanna, hosanna” – *save us*. This Messiah would speak peace to the nations by *crushing* them. They *knew* he would.

Of course, that didn’t happen. Jesus fulfilled the prophecy, but not the way most people hoped. The peace that he brought was peace with *God*. The salvation he accomplished was for every tribe and tongue and nation, not just for the Jews. And the blood of the covenant was Jesus’ own, shed on the cross.

They had the facts straight. They recognized Jesus for who he was – and completely, utterly misunderstood what he had come to *do*. They saw, and yet they were *blind*.

That’s not really all that remarkable. If anything, that’s human nature. The really interesting thing – what I hope you notice, and take home, is Jesus’ amazing response to their blindness: he wept.

As he drew close to the city, Luke says, Jesus sobbed – not for himself, not for the pain and suffering that awaited him, which we cannot *begin* to fathom, the separation of the Son from the Father, the weight of sin – but for *them*. For the blind people of Jerusalem, who were expecting mighty Judas Maccabeus, only to receive a sacrificial lamb. And for the disaster that would befall them on account of their blindness.

“Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you in on every side... they will not leave one stone standing upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation.”

Which, of course, happened, only three decades later. It was the end course of the disease described in the first chapter of John’s Gospel: “he came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.” (John 1:11) What they received was not Jesus himself, but their own idea of what he *should be*. And a wishful-thinking savior is no savior at all.

What we see here in Jesus is something utterly unique – something that simply does not occur elsewhere in human experience, the combination of two qualities that in anyone else are contradictory: *perfect sovereignty*, and *perfect mercy*. No one else in all creation – no political leader, no religious figure, comes even remotely close.

You see the sovereignty very clearly in verse 30 – Jesus tells his disciples that if they go into the village ahead, they’ll find a donkey colt, ready and waiting. Now, it *may* be that there was some prior communication, some previous arrangement. But none of the Gospels give even a hint of it: the clear suggestion is that Jesus, the second person of the Holy Trinity, the divine Word through whom all things were made, *ordained* the universe in such a way that that donkey was ready.

And in verse 39, in Jesus’ response to some of the Pharisees, who heard the cries of hosanna, and scolded him: “Teacher,” they said, “rebuke your disciples.” His reply? “I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out.” Creation itself would have sung his praises, and proclaimed the one Word through whom all things were spoken into being. If we refuse him praise, the *rocks of the field* will offer it instead.

And you see his sovereignty in his warnings to his disciples – three times, he warned the twelve, his inner circle, that the Son of Man would go up to Jerusalem, and there *everything spoken by the prophets* would be fulfilled, and he would be handed over to Gentiles and mocked and killed, and on the third day rise again. (Luke 18:31-33)

So there’s no question who’s in charge here. None of it came as a surprise to Jesus. It was all according to plan. And yet... and yet, Jesus *wept* over the hard-hearted people through whom that plan was accomplished. Real tears. Real sorrow.

That, incidentally, doesn't mean that Jesus here somehow doubts the goodness of the Father, or the wisdom of the plan. He simply expresses his genuine sorrow over the situation. The same is true of Christians, by the way – we can know, for example, that God's ways are higher than our ways, that he works all things together for good, for those are called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28) and yet feel genuine sorrow over the state of the world, over the suffering and pain and injustice and sin before our eyes. We *should* know that, and yet feel sorrow, because Jesus did, and we are supposed to have the same “mind among [ourselves], which is [ours] in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 2:5)

So Jesus' sovereign mercy is moved by suffering, as ours should be. But it also moved him to action. If you like, sovereign action. Mercy has to be helpful, if it's going to be any good to anyone. And Jesus' great act of mercy was that, moved to sorrow by sin and unbelief, he willingly laid down his life – he died in our place, so that we might be forgiven and have eternal life with him.

We know sovereignty, in the form of raw power. We see it at work in the world every day. And we know mercy, at least in small things. But in Jesus Christ – only in Jesus Christ – are *perfect sovereignty* and *perfect mercy* united. And that, as much as anything, is his claim to the crown – not just of Israel, but of ourselves. Will you be blind, and see what you want to see, or by the grace of God, will you recognize your King for who he truly is, and give him the glory of your worship, and your obedience, in this world, and in the next? Amen.