

## A Triumphal Procession Luke 19:29-40

I've recently been reading a biography about Caesar Augustus. Do you remember him? Augustus was the Emperor of Rome at the time of Jesus' birth. As Luke puts it in his gospel, "In those days (the days of Jesus' birth) a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered." (Lk. 2:1) Not only was Augustus the Roman ruler at the time of Jesus' nativity, he was also the adopted son of Julius Caesar; as a consequence, much of his biography necessarily deals with his more famous adoptive father, Julius, though perhaps Augustus really was the greater of the two.

In September of 46 B.C., according to Anthony Everitt's biography of Augustus, Julius Caesar celebrated four separate Roman triumphs commemorating four different of his victories over various of his foes. In case you're unaware, a Roman triumph was a military parade commemorating a general's success in some campaign against a foreign enemy. In this instance, Julius was celebrating his conquest of Gaul, his triumph over Egypt, his victory in Asia, and his defeat of Numidia – any one of which was worthy of a triumph – so each of the four received its own.

According to Everitt's biography, "On the day of the triumph (commemorating Julius Caesar's victory in the African campaign), Caesar arrayed himself in some of the attributes of Jupiter, king of the gods and protector of Rome. His face was smeared with the same red paint that covered the great statue of Jupiter on the Capitoline Hill. Underneath an embroidered toga, he wore a purple tunic interwoven with gold and embroidered with palm leaves, a symbol of victory. After making a speech and presenting military awards and decorations, Caesar reviewed the troops. These were then marshaled in column of route, and Caesar mounted a gilded chariot. A slave stood on the chariot with him, to hold a golden crown above his head and say in his ear that he was mortal...The procession moved off in the direction of the city. The Senate led the way, after which came trumpeters and garlanded white oxen with gilded horns; the oxen would be sacrificed later. Then followed the spoils of war and floats with tableaux and paintings illustrating highlights of the African campaign...Finally, Caesar and his legions arrived...On the Capitoline, the ceremonies drew to a close with a mass sacrifice of the oxen, followed by a banquet in the Temple of Jupiter. To the sound of flutes, Caesar was escorted home to the Domus Publica, the official residence of the *pontifex maximus* (Rome's chief priest)."<sup>1</sup>

Well today is Palm Sunday, the day we celebrate Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. In some ways, his triumphal entry was similar to a Roman triumph, and particularly to the triumphal procession of Julius Caesar as just described. You see:

- Caesar was the leader of Roman. Jesus was and is the leader of God's people.

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<sup>1</sup> *Augustus: The Life of Rome's First Emperor* by Anthony Everitt. Random House Trade Paperback Edition, 2007, pp. 40-41.

- Caesar arrayed himself in the attributes of Jupiter, king of the gods and protector of Rome. Jesus was God incarnate, and he remains the Protector of his own.
- Caesar was celebrating a victory over his enemies, and Jesus was about to accomplish an even greater victory than Caesar's, a victory over sin and death.
- Caesar was escorted by his soldiers and greeted by his people. Jesus was escorted by his disciples and acclaimed by the crowds.
- Caesar was accompanied by a slave who held a golden crown above his head, and Jesus was about to be crowned King of Kings and Lord of Lords through his glorious resurrection.
- Caesar's procession culminated in a sacrifice – the sacrifice of oxen. Jesus's triumphal procession culminated in another sacrifice – the sacrifice of himself.
- Caesar's procession was followed by a banquet. Jesus' procession was followed within a few short days by one last supper with his disciples.
- Caesar ended his day in the official residence of the *pontifex maximus* – Rome's chief priest. Jesus would shortly end his earthly sojourn by ascending into heaven to become High Priest over all of God's people where he ever liveth to make intercession for us! (Heb. 7:24-25)

Yes, there were many similarities between Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and a Roman triumph – particularly the triumph of Julius Caesar. But there were some significant differences, too.

- Caesar, after all, was celebrating a military triumph – the triumph of violence over his foes – but Jesus came as the Prince of Peace to win his enemies back to God.
- Caesar was also celebrating his rule over Rome – an earthly kingdom – but Jesus was celebrating his rule over a spiritual kingdom – the Kingdom of God – which transcends every border and boundary, and embraces all who are willing to accept it.
- Caesar was arrogant, as all of his rich regalia indicted. Jesus was humble, as indicated by the manner in which he entered Jerusalem. For you see, Caesar entered Rome proudly in a chariot pulled by four powerful steeds. But Jesus entered Jerusalem humbly, riding a colt, the foal of an ass, to fulfil the ancient prophecy – the prophecy of Zechariah – which says: "Rejoice greatly, O Daughter 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." (Zechariah 9:9)

Yes, there were many similarities between Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and a Roman triumph – particularly the triumph of Julius Caesar – though I suspect his triumph was very much like every other. But there were some significant differences, too. And perhaps the greatest difference was the difference in the sacrifices that each offered at the end of their triumphal procession. Caesar offered a sacrifice of oxen to Jupiter to thank him, I suppose, for the victory he was celebrating, and to secure, I imagine, the

continued favor of this god. But Jesus offered the sacrifice of himself – something a Caesar would never do – to demonstrate God’s continued favor on wayward people like you and me – a favor that would go out of its way and all the way to death for the us and for all!

You see, when Jesus rode into Jerusalem, the Cross was already in view. He knew his triumphal procession would end in a cruel crucifixion. And yet he rode on.

- He rode on into a city that would reject him in the end.
- He rode through a cheering but fickle crowd – a crowd that would soon turn on him and finally cry for his crucifixion.
- He rode through the praises of his own disciples – disciples who he knew would fail him in his hour of need; for Judas would betray; Peter would deny him; and the others would abandon him to his fate.
- He rode into the teeth of his critics and his enemies, like the Pharisees who complained about him always, even as he entered Jerusalem, and the chief priests and scribes who conspired together in his death.
- He rode into the place of Barabbas the insurrectionist so that Barabbas could go free, with Jesus dying in his stead.
- He rode into the hands of Pilate and the governing authorities who would finally give the order commanding his cruel crucifixion.
- He rode into the arms of the Roman soldiers who would beat him bloody and mock him cruelly.
- He rode up a hill called Calvary to a cross for you and me.

Yes, Jesus rode into Jerusalem, not to glorify himself or to cow his enemies as Caesar did in his triumphal processions, but rather to give himself up in loving sacrifice for a people such as this...for a people such as us...to show us just how much we’re loved, and to win us back to God by the demonstration of this affection. That is what made his procession such a triumph! That is why we call it the Triumphal Procession, even to this day! It was and is the Triumphal Procession of God’s loving mercy as revealed to us in Jesus the Christ!

My friends, in his sermon for this Sunday, Steven Pierce tells the following story: “It was Palm Sunday, but because of a sore throat, 5-year-old Annie stayed home from church with her mother. When the rest of the family returned home, they were carrying palm fronds. Annie asked them what they were for. ‘People held them over Jesus’ head as he rode by on a colt,’ her father explained. ‘Wouldn’t you know it,’ Annie fussed, ‘the one Sunday I’m sick and Jesus shows up and offers pony rides!’”<sup>2</sup>

Well my friends, it’s Palm Sunday and Jesus has shown up again, but he isn’t offering pony rides this time. Instead, he’s riding into our midst to give us what he has always given us – the loving mercy of a gracious God to any who receive it. No matter who

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<sup>2</sup> *Ain’t No Rock Gonna Shout For Me* by Rev. Dr. Steven Pierce. Posted at: [http://day1.org/8356-steven\\_pierce\\_aint\\_no\\_rock\\_gonna\\_shout\\_for\\_me](http://day1.org/8356-steven_pierce_aint_no_rock_gonna_shout_for_me).

you are, or what you've done, or what you've failed to do, he has come for you! What say you welcome him this time just as he was welcomed of old, saying, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest!" Will you give him a triumphal entry into your heart today? Will you welcome his loving favor and crown him your King forever? You think about that. Amen!